

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Monday 16 December 2019, 5.00pm

Natasha Mitchell

Presenter, 'Science Friction', ABC Radio National

Thank you, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Chancellor, and honourable guests.

And thank you to the people of the Kulin Nation, and their elders, on whose land we gather today and whose ancestors were the first scientists here.

When British colonisers came to live in this place they declared it "*Terra Nullius*" ... "Nobody's Land".

This ignored the fact that the first peoples had lived and were sustained here for over 60000 years. That they had complex knowledge systems.

And as scientists, I hope we never forget that it was arguments made in the guise of SCIENCE – eugenic rhetoric about race, and heredity, and interbreeding – that were used to justify the forced removal of indigenous children from their mothers and fathers and families.

And if your family bares those scars, and you are here graduating today – then an extra loud, proud cheer for you.

...

But to each and every one of you here.

Congratulations.

You have made it. You did it.

That hard-earned Bachelor's degree.

That Masters.

Or that PhD.

It's yours to KEEP.

I hope you are doing a little dance on the inside right now. If I ran the show we'd be pumping up the volume and I'd be asking you to dance in the aisles with me.

Congratulations also to your family, friends, and supporters if they are here today – this is their day as well. I hope you soak up their pride.

And this is why, in the few minutes we have together, I want to talk about LOVE.

But I also want to talk about POWER.

In my view, YOU are one of the most important cohorts of scientists to ever graduate in the entire history of humanity.

The choices you make, the challenges you take on come at a turning point for the planet, its life systems, and species.

It's a time where your formal training in science will need to be augmented by skills in listening, connecting, communicating, and empathy.

...

This knowledge you have - this scientific knowledge – IS POWERFUL.

How you choose to use it from this moment on WILL BE POWERFUL.

You might use it to do a good job. To have good life. To make good money.

And these are all reasonable goals.

But you might also use it to **CHANGE THE WORLD**. And to help others change the world too.

...

We now live in an era where **POWERFUL** interests are being used to compromise **TRUTHS**.

It's always has been that way, vested interests have always found a way to control the agenda and serve their own needs, but those interests now have new tools at their disposal.

FAKE NEWS is being promulgated as **FACT**.

PHOTOSHOPPED images as **REAL**.

And **FACEBOOK'S MONETISED ALGORITHMS** now determine what stories we see or *don't* see, what information we believe or *don't* believe.

Yes, social media platforms help us connect in important and profound ways.

Emoji by emoji. They give us that little satisfying surge of serotonin. **BUT** right now social media platforms are also being used to unseat governments, hack election campaigns, and spread untruths...

...

In my mind, this is what makes your qualification in **SCIENCE** so vital today.

Now...you may not end up being a scientist, or working in a lab, or running experiments.

And I'm here to say that is absolutely fine.

I quit a PhD in engineering to become a radio presenter, broadcaster and science journalist.

And I haven't looked back.

In hindsight, quitting things can be a strategic move. That's my excuse anyway.

It can also be about asking "how can I be most effective in this world?"

But I *never stopped* using what I learnt studying science and engineering.

And you too will carry that capacity ...to question everything, to be sceptical, to interrogate evidence, to be *insatiably* curious about the world, and to be open-minded... into **EVERYTHING** that you do.

It will make you want to keep **LEARNING** all your life.

You won't be able to help yourself.

That's the best kind of addiction.

Better than Facebook.

...

We're often told that science qualifications help drive the knowledge economy and economic growth.

Sure, they do that. But they ALSO allow us to...

...bear witness to the natural world and the other species who are eking out an existence alongside our own, often in dwindling habitats.

...they help us understand and adapt to a world reshaped by anthropogenic climate change.

...they help you ask tough questions of politicians and others who fail to deploy evidence and data to inform their policies.

In fact, you have a rare and precious opportunity to take the stage with your science.

An opportunity. But also, perhaps, a responsibility.

Last time I checked, just 7 percent of Australia's politicians had some kind of scientific training.

Really? At this point in the 20th Century, we only have 7 PERCENT?

Who's up for a career in politics? :]

...

Finally and briefly to LOVE.

Increasingly our workforce is being fractionated.

You probably know that all too well.

Short term casual contracts are the norm.

From Uber to Airtasker...the gig economy is here...where you have all the freedom, all the choice, but none of the power, and often poor pay.

We can keep our heads down like good little worker bees, competing for the dollar and to pay our bills.

Or we can look up at the world around us, and ask why is it so?

And, how is that person over there doing?

...

As scientists, we can be hard headed in our analysis of the state of the world.

But COMPASSIONATE in our actions.

...

So...what does a COMPASSIONATE SCIENCE look like?

I think it means looking at HOW you DO your science.

Who it impacts.

Who or what it helps.

Who it harms.

Who it serves.

Who do you employ in your workplaces, how diverse are they or do they look and sound just like you?

Who has a voice and who doesn't?

What questions are you are ignoring in your experiments?

What answers are you are ignoring your data?

...

The world is yours.

I can't think of a better training for it than the degrees you are here to graduate with.

I am excited to see where you take your training.

Enjoy your celebrations today.

Embrace your power. Use it with love.

And congratulations.

Thank you.

END.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

This afternoon the University welcomes Natasha Mitchell as guest speaker.

Natasha is presenter of 'Science Friction', ABC Radio National's science, technology and culture program and podcast. She is a multi-award-winning presenter, and a member of the Executive Advisory board of Women in Science Australia.

A graduate in engineering from Monash University and in science communication from Australian National University, Natasha has received accolades internationally for her broadcast work, including the overall Grand Prize and four Gold World Medals at the New York Radio Festivals, four Australian and New Zealand Mental Health Broadcast Media Awards, the Yooralla Broadcast Media Award, and the Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Professionals' Award.

She has also served on the Human Genetics Advisory Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Pease join me in welcoming Natasha Mitchell.