

Occasional Address

Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, Saturday 29 July 2017, 4.00pm

Professor Charles Guest
Chief Health Officer for the State of Victoria

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Colleagues, Students and Supporters

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people, who have been custodians of this area for thousands of years.

To all students in this hall: Congratulations on your graduation day! I hope you are as proud on graduating here today as I was.

Let me declare my bias as I express my pride in this institution. It begins with family history. Early in the Second World War, my father had the opportunity to graduate here. My mother, studying here later, never completed her Melbourne degree.

There was a lesson my parents: life is not fair. Many of you have also learnt that during your studies. In the unfair world, you have needed hope and resilience to reach today's graduation.

Hoping for inspiration, I asked an Irish woman of my acquaintance what I should say this afternoon. "You should think of yourself as the body in the coffin at an old-fashioned Irish wake," she said. "They need you in order to have the party, but no one expects you to say very much."

So I will be brief, trying, as the University has, not to fill a bucket, but to light a fire.

How much this University, this City, this Country have changed since my parents were here! Most obvious here and now, are your diverse backgrounds. How lucky we are to have students from all over the world among us!

Many universities have changed profoundly in recent decades. Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis's recent essay compares the modern university, and its struggles, to the dissolution of monasteries during the time of King Henry VIII. Henry was pursuing funds for his military campaigns. But there was great damage to scholarship and to art, during this reformation of the English church.

Some five centuries later, by contrast, I hope that your time here has given you a sense of the value of universities and their capacity to nurture creative thinking. Just as scholarship was worth preserving centuries ago, universities are still worth defending in the face of political and economic challenges to their work. Despite all their achievements over the centuries, universities are, again, vulnerable.

However, your graduations today are cause for hope. I hope you will see that graduating from this university represents one stage completed in your life of learning.

My own version of life-long learning arises today as I represent the City, by which I mean the rest of society, which should support and be supported by, the university. In my case, the City means the Department of Health, just one of the end users of, or the industry partners for, University research and teaching.

The university and its partners in the City should have a profound connection. In the knowledge economy, we should all be learning: that is what the City, indeed the whole of society, needs.

What does lifelong learning require?

First, perhaps, is application. Then curiosity, and a continuing search for truth. With authenticity, lifelong learners can bear witness to the variety of human experience. This demands courage, and more.

Learning requires hope, a cognitive activity that involves setting concrete goals, finding ways to achieve those goals, and tapping one's willpower to move towards those goals.

Hope is one way of actively confronting, exploring and sometimes accepting our limitations.

To hope well is to do more than focus on hoped-for ends: It is to take a reflective and developmental stance towards our own capacities as agents – thus to experience ourselves as agents of potential, in self-knowledge.

In turn, self-knowledge includes the capacity to turn for a moment from the work of thinking to a different mode of being, digesting and assimilating what the intelligence of the learner has produced or discovered, preparing, perhaps, to go further still, while pausing in self-awareness.

For me the struggle to go on learning is best summarised by Hippocrates, that Greek physician sometimes called the father of medicine. But at least in the aphorism I now quote, we might recognise him as one of the parents of learning:

Life is short
The art so long to learn
Opportunity fleeting
Experiment dangerous
Judgement difficult

Life is short – yes, live in the present; avoid looking back, which is one source of depression, while too much looking forward can be a source of anxiety. The art so long to learn – yes, learning any trade or profession may take a lifetime. The journey in hope is what matters, more than reaching a conclusion.

Opportunity fleeting – yes, assume your best chance is now: seize the day. It may be better to apologise later than to wait for permission as the moment passes.

Experiment dangerous – not only for the scientist, but for any of us: there is always the risk of following false leads or causing harm through ignorance

Judgement difficult – not only for the lawyer, but for any of us, again there is the risk of false ideas and faulty deduction.

It is easy, in theory, to tell others how they should live their lives. But how difficult in practice to make the best of your own life.

In both your theory and your practice of life, I hope you will continue to recognise the value of lifelong learning. Please believe that learning is one form of hope.

Academic Board President's Introduction

Presiding Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen:

This afternoon we are fortunate to be addressed by the Chief Health Officer for the State of Victoria, Professor Charles Guest. Professor Guest is a graduate of the University of Melbourne, receiving his Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in 1980.

He also holds a Bachelor of Arts from Deakin University, a Master of Public Health from Harvard University, and, coming full circle, a PhD from the University of Melbourne. Professor Guest has contributed for more than a decade in a variety of specialist roles with the Australian Capital Territory Directorate, better known as ACT Health, including serving as Chief Health Officer of the ACT.

From 2008 to 2016, he was Professor in the College of Medicine, Biology and Environment at the Australian National University. He was appointed last year as Chief Health Officer for Victoria, a role involving strategy, advice to government, communicating to the public and performing legislative functions, all in relation to public health and wellbeing. It's a pleasure to call on him to speak this afternoon. Please welcome Professor Charles Guest.