

# Graduation Speech

## Wayne Warburton, September 2007

Chancellor/Deputy Chancellor/Vice Chancellor  
Members of the University  
Fellow graduates and Guests

Thank you for the honour of speaking on behalf of the graduates in today's ceremony.

Today, I would like to speak briefly about stories. For every cap and gown in this auditorium there is a story. A goal to achieve a degree and the reasons for that goal. Hundreds of different life stories leading up to us attending this university, and a multitude of experiences and events at this university that have culminated in us wearing this strange outfit and waiting expectantly to receive written recognition that we have finally achieved our degree. I want to talk a little more about these stories in a minute, but first, let me tell you a little about my own journey.

I was 16 when my secondary schooling came to a premature end in 1976. I took a job driving a delivery vehicle for a plumbing supplies store, and after two years embarked on a plumbing apprenticeship. I learnt my trade, earned my license, and eventually took on apprentices of my own.

I was a plumber for 17 years in total, and during those 17 years I spent many hours, plunger in one hand and cuppa in the other, listening to other people's stories. I heard about the life experiences of terminally ill clients to whom I delivered medical oxygen, tradespeople from every imaginable background and culture, elderly and lonely clients, and people who carried out all sorts of paid and unpaid work. And what I learned from these conversations is that when you get talking to people, really talking, you discover that most people have led surprisingly interesting lives, and have seen and done all sorts of remarkable things.

In February, 1995, my time as a chatty tradesman came to an end, as my own life story took an unexpected turn. I was involved in a shocking car accident. I was trapped in the car wreck for an hour whilst rescue crews cut me out. I couldn't feel my legs, I wondered if I would die or be unable to walk. Two years of physical and psychological rehabilitation followed, and then the big question - now that my injuries precluded further work as a tradesman, what would I do?

My interest in people and their stories drew me to psychology. I asked around, and was told consistently that the Psychology Department at Macquarie was particularly well-respected. But how does one get into university without a higher school certificate?

It turns out that Macquarie is interested in stories too. They have a scheme – the Jubilee Scheme - that allows people who would normally be precluded from university entrance, like myself, to tell their story and possibly enter university on a trial basis. Macquarie took me in, and my life took a totally new direction.

It wasn't easy adjusting to university life after nearly two decades on building sites, especially as a student with lingering physical difficulties from my car accident, but I

discovered that Macquarie has good support services for students with disabilities, including a very well-equipped special equipment area in the library. I studied hard, made good friends, overcame obstacles as they arose, and enjoyed many pleasant surprises along the way.

My experience has been that Macquarie is an **inclusive** university. A plumber with limited secondary education and physical difficulties can learn alongside students from dozens of countries, alongside students with every imaginable interest and background, alongside students with cerebral palsy or who are blind or confined to a wheelchair. Alongside a whole range of people who share my interest in the human mind and in language. Alongside the people graduating here today.

One doesn't have to look very hard to see that there are thousands of amazing stories in this auditorium. People who have overcome every manner of obstacle to attain their degree. People with disabilities. Survivors of illness. People trying to complete their studies in the precious hours after their children have gone to bed, like my friend Fiona, who entered university with 7 children aged 3 to 17, and whose every essay was written between the hours of 11 and 2 after her kids were finally in bed. People trying to pay their mortgage and study at the same time. People who were raised speaking another language. People recently moved from another culture or who are from a minority group within Australia.

There are many stories of triumph and delight in this auditorium too. People who have discovered themselves capable of so much more than they thought, who have made lifelong friends, who have received amazing support from partners, parents, friends, and relatives, who have just enjoyed the experience.

This graduation is a celebration of all your stories, a recognition of the journey that each of you has walked to be here, a celebration of the sacrifices, the tears, the accomplishments and disappointments, the friendships and the camaraderie. It is a recognition of the support of families, friends and partners, and of the many teachers you have had along the way. It signifies obstacles overcome, goals attained, and personal growth.

Macquarie is an inclusive university, and the diverse and fascinating group graduating here today is proof of that.

I would like to conclude by noting that there are various pressures against such inclusiveness in today's world. An increased expectancy that universities will be self-funding puts pressure on universities to raise fees and to accept more students who are able to pay more for their education. Economic pressures and rising costs make it harder and harder to maintain peripheral programs, such as those for students with disabilities. An increased reliance on internet-based teaching, coupled with a digital divide between those with and without access to Information and Communications Technologies at home, makes a tertiary degree less accessible to some groups in contemporary Australia.

As Macquarie faces these issues, along with other Australian universities, I believe it is important that the university continues to embrace inclusiveness, to pursue an environment where **all** people may come together to learn and to share their stories, to find ways to make this possible in a changing world.

Congratulations to you all.