UoW Occasional Address – Captain Stephen Hussey, RAN

Deputy Chancellor, members of the University, Graduates, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my great honour to speak here this evening, although you might already be wondering what sage advice a Naval Officer coming toward the end of his career can provide that might possibly be of relevance to the graduates in the audience as they sit and ponder life’s options.

It is a moot question which I have no clever answer for, save to say that life is about personal choice - we all have one life and no-one else is able to live it for us. As it runs its unique course we are bombarded with advice, both good and bad, and this is such a moment where you may choose to decide the relevance and value of yet one more morsel of (wisdom in my view) and what you might wish to do with it. You should at the very least challenge what are after all, my own personal views borne out of the events and circumstances that have led me to this place in time.

If you need to wrap perspective around these words, attach personal weight (or otherwise) to them, then I will give you a brief history of the experience from which they were forged.

I joined the British Navy 40 years ago at the tender age of 16 as a fresh faced, sailor recruit. Mine has been a long and varied career that has spanned four decades, two wars, three if you include the cold war, seen service on three continents and in two Navies. I have worked in many countries and shared experiences with a myriad of professional leaders. My first decade was spent navigating a sailor’s career path where at the tender age of twenty six I reached its zenith and decided to accept a commission. My last 30 years of service have been in the officer corps where I have been fortunate to captain submarines at sea and provide them direction from ashore. Most recently, I moved into a military educational role and over the past few years have run two training authorities and held key positions in a third. I currently head an establishment and organisation that provides all of the Royal Australian Navy’s Leadership, Management and Initial Entry training, for both officers and sailors.
In tandem with a military career I have maintained a busy and active family life. I have also owned and run a small business for nearly 6 years, although my wife will assert ‘correctly’, that she was the driver behind this. And I have two children, one 30 year old son who is a graduate from Portsmouth University in the UK and a 21 year old daughter who is currently studying at UWA.

So for what it’s worth, I am confident to stand here today and offer a few choice thoughts that I have grown to trust and value over my personal life journey, and which I believe are apposite to most of the graduates here tonight. I hope that you find them in some way useful.

If any of you have seen Tim Minchin’s address to UWA in 2013, I will immediately dispel any expectation you might have that this will be in any way comparable and, probably to be expected, is unlikely to be as entertaining. It will however draw a little on Mr M’s format in that I intend to provide my advice, sage or otherwise, in the form of my ten top tips….

So here goes….

1. **Don’t think that a degree in itself entitles you to anything**: Now there’s a controversial one to start with! You should appreciate what you have achieved, understand what it represents and use your hard earned qualification to good effect – don’t waste the sacrifice you have made. Formal qualifications and certificates are a facilitator to employment and can open doors but at their base they are simply an ‘indication’, and an indication only of the mental capacity and tenacity of an individual. They do not guarantee lasting things an employer, colleague or friend might truly value such as integrity, output, ingenuity, or even the simple fact that you are someone exiting to know. What a degree does demonstrate is potential, sometimes a particular bent and in all cases a level of capability, something that those of you new to the workforce will be able to offer shortly in interviews.

I believe that a degree also has a contemporary value in that it has immediate currency and, like radioactivity, is at its most potent in the immediate aftermath following its attainment. Just like radioactivity, it also has a shelf-life and its potency deteriorates over time, largely dependant upon the flavour of the study undertaken. Later, demonstrated ability and experience will become more important selling points, anecdotes and life lessons will endear you to the company you choose to keep and long term relationships based on mutual respect and trust will
sustain you in times of hardship. So use your education well and appreciate it for what it is, a valuable but temporary commodity if it is not topped up regularly and carefully maintained.

2. (all of us need money to survive) – that’s not the tip, the tip is…..

**Find a career or job that you like:** if you do then at some stage it will cease to be a job and will instead become your vocation. You may not stumble across this at your first attempt, I am a poor example of this as I did, but I have known many people over the years who have discovered their true passions later on in life! I would therefore advocate as much change as is necessary in order to achieve contentment in your place of work as this is one of the key aspects to quality of life. Note that I place an emphasis on quality of life rather than standard of living. Cash is important, but the Beatles were right, there are some things money can’t buy. Getting up in the morning, exited to commence your day, every day, is gold.

3. **Be accountable in everything you do:** Own up, be responsible, take accountability for your actions and you will earn peoples respect. Short term avoidance is dangerous, particularly if it comes at the expense of trust – most times the truth will out. So be honest and open, admit your mistakes and fallibility and you will rise in people’s estimation – unless you continue to repeat the same errors in which case owning up ceases to work.

4. **Don’t accept things on face value:** Most guidance has been formed with utmost rigour but it is foolhardy to accept that this is always the case. No-one has the monopoly on stupidity and it can still be found in the most unusual and unexpected places. Your eyebrows should raise when you hear the response, ‘because that’s the way it’s always been done – doesn’t make it right, it may mean that it hasn’t been the subject of robust and rigorous challenge before. The world needs critical observation otherwise the Emperor would still be parading the streets naked. Equally, be wary of precedent setting the agenda – always challenge new ideas constructively because once implemented they may form the platform from which an initiative succeeds or fails. And always, always go with your gut feeling, it will rarely let you down.

5. **Provide solutions, not problems:** This is all about being positive and value adding, not being an anchor to progress or the ultimate party pooper. Life is full of challenges, at work and at play. When they occur it is always good to be around people who meet them with confidence and a plan, no matter how quickly forged. So join the glass half full
brigade, give freely of your opinion and advice and don’t be shy in the face of hierarchical structure, perceived or otherwise – you may just be the one person in the room who has the answer.

6. **Be resilient!** in every aspect of your life. Resilience is 90% about planning and preparation, the other 10% is genetic and is out of your hands. What you can influence, you should. Whether it is your physical, mental or spiritual wellbeing, you should be proactive and not leave things to chance. Serendipity is not an option here. Lead an active and meaningful life, and fill every day with positive measures. Well maintained resilience is a bottomless bucket of personal confidence upon which you can draw when needed and in times of stress, but it doesn’t happen by chance unless you are one of a very lucky, gifted few. For most, it needs to be taken to the well and replenished constantly because, if left to its own devices your resilience will atrophy over time. So be the strong one in the crowd, be silently so if you wish - resilience isn’t about volume, it is about resolution, stamina and sheer will at times.

7. **Don’t actively seek recognition:** let others acknowledge your strengths and achievements. It is far better that your effort and input is highlighted by others, particularly if their opinion is valued. While your successes will hopefully be many and varied, your friends, family and workmates will appreciate you more, not less, if you take the humble road rather than the boastful path.

8. **Help Others:** That’s it! Seriously though - you are already (statistically) luckier than most to be here and the fact that you are graduating today identifies you as someone who is likely to achieve success at a level above the population norm. So be grateful for your head start in life, albeit hard won through your personal sweat, tears and many nights of study. Rejoice in your good fortune by helping others less fortunate along the way. Remember, Karma is a wonderful thing.

9. **Run your own race:** and at your own pace! Life is not a sprint to the finish, nor is it always a long, tedious marathon with an ending too distant to contemplate. It is instead a series of twists and turns, challenging inclines and exhilarating decents and it varies in length dependant upon the runner. The advice I offer in this respect is to address things as and where you find them and don’t expect others to run your race for you. The returns from life are directly proportional to the application and involvement you invest. Don’t be a bystander and watch life unfold before your eyes, grab opportunity when it presents and actively shape your direction and future.
There is no template you can apply or hard and fast rules that will guarantee success. Equally, you shouldn’t envy other peoples talents or possessions - don’t covet what you aren’t able to achieve yourself as this is a self-licking ice cream that never satisfies. Living vocariously will not lead to fulfilment. You need to be your best and play to your strengths – try your hardest, reach your full potential and you will be happy. And maybe, just maybe, there will be someone out there envious of what you have been able to achieve.

10. **Finally, education is like a tattoo:** it is never too late to get one! I understand that there are graduates tonight older than I which makes me feel both humbled and vindicated in equal measure. (being a sailor of many years, and using tattoos as a metaphor, I am sure that some in the audience thought that I was about to say you can never get enough). I, unlike most here tonight, came late to the academic party. Having left high school early to join the Navy, I have navigated the majority of my naval career with a year 10 education however last year I took 12 months away from my day job to study and achieved a Masters in my own right. I have to say it was one of the more rewarding things I have done of late and refreshed my appreciation of the value to be gained from continual improvement.

So my final message to tonight’s graduating class is, don’t let it end here. There are many opportunities for self-improvement further down the track and while you are head down, bum up, fully immersed in the challenges life brings it is sometimes easy to miss opportunities or a chance to introduce new chapters into your personal compendium of experiences. Let this be merely the start of your learning journey and wherever life takes you I hope that it brings you happiness, solutions, resilience, recognition, love and last but not least, quality of life.

Thank you