

UniSA graduation, Occasional address, Jason White 17th April 2018

Graduands, it is a great privilege to share with you a very special time in your lives and a day that you will remember always.

When I was in your situation many years ago, I thought that the most important thing about graduating was never having to do university exams again! I hated them with a passion and I'm sure some of you feel the same.

The other thing that I now know, is that when I graduated, I could not possibly have predicted how my career was going to turn out. And I am sure for most of you the same will prove to be true.

In my case, I discovered a passion for research that has been a constant through many twists and turns in my career. I changed disciplines from psychology to pharmacology, which initially seemed like it did nothing other than slow my career progression, but eventually the knowledge of the two disciplines proved to be a great asset. I also became an academic, so much of my time was spent in teaching as well as in research. I came to enjoy teaching very much, but of course it meant that I inflicted the hated exams on thousands of students like yourselves. I can only apologise for being such a turncoat!

So, is there anything useful that I've learned that may be of benefit to you as new graduates?

One of the things I wish I'd known when I sat where you are today, is that it doesn't really matter if you've not yet set a plan or major goal in your professional careers.

The reality is that many of us, myself included, have had immensely satisfying professional lives just by going where opportunities led. Instead of searching for the ultimate goal, focus on taking opportunities when they arise - and if those opportunities are not coming and you need greater challenge in your work – go out and look for opportunities that interest you.

Four years ago, the World Health Organisation invited me to join one of their committees. I accepted, even though at the time I definitely didn't need anything further work to do. However, the work with WHO, now as co-chair of the committee and a strategic and policy advisor, has become one of the most enjoyable and satisfying parts of my career. It's not something I could have planned, but it's an opportunity that I am incredibly glad I pursued.

Graduands, don't be too concerned if your career path isn't particularly clear as you leave this place; but make sure you recognise and seek out opportunities, and seize them if they are right for you.

The second observation I would make, is that you will undoubtedly have times in your professional life when your career slows, stalls or even goes backwards. Understand that this happens to all of us at some stage - even if it's not obvious to others around us – and for all sorts of reasons.

I can recall as an early career academic developing a health problem that limited my ability to read and write for anything other than short periods. For a while, it seemed that my whole career was under threat, but over several years I found ways to maintain just enough productivity to keep my career intact until the problem was eventually rectified.

Every confronting situation, whether a health problem, a difficult workplace or whatever it might be, should challenge you to figure out how you can turn the situation around and move forward. The ability to be resilient in the face of adversity, and to persist when things aren't going your way, is the personal attribute most important for your long-term success.

The third lesson I've learned, is that the key to satisfaction in your professional life is to focus on making it meaningful. Aim to be doing something that you are convinced is worthwhile and of benefit to others. If you doubt the value of your work, you will never really gain much satisfaction from doing it, no matter how much money you earn or what status you attain.

As health graduates, most of you will be in a role that benefits others in the community, which is a great start to feeling the satisfaction and pride that comes from doing a job that is worthwhile. But from time to time reflect on your role, and if you feel a lack of enjoyment in your work, challenge yourself as to its worth, and think about how you can make helping others a greater focus of what you do.

As the British war-time Prime Minister Winston Churchill said: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

Graduands, let me end by wishing each one of you all the very best in your future career, in whatever direction it may go.

My generation is counting on your generation to make the world a better place – so please, go out there and do it!

Thank you