

Professor Mohamad Abdalla

UniSA Graduation Ceremony Speech

13 April 2018

I am humbled to be standing before you on this significant occasion and I would like to congratulate you all for achieving this most rewarding and significant milestone.

I know the challenges and the difficulties that you must have experienced along this journey.

I am sure, however, that there were many moments of joy as well.

When I came to Australia in 1985, I could not speak or write English and I did not know what I wanted to do, or what type of studies I wanted to undertake.

I, and like some or many of you, had to struggle with English.

When I migrated to Australia in 1985 I could not speak or write English, and I had to learn it from scratch.

Equally, I had to learn a new culture, and a new way of knowing and being.

Like many of you, I had to work to earn a living and help my parents and siblings settle in their new home, Australia.

During the course of my Ph.D., the tragic events of September 11, 2001 happened, and I had to deal with that issue as the spokesperson of the Muslim community.

Two weeks after that, our mosque in Brisbane was totally burned down and it was the first one to be burned down in the world.

Add to this, my principal Ph.D. supervisor had a pancreas failure and was out of action for nine months, and I was given the task of coordinating a class of 250 students.

I am sure each one of us has a story to tell about their struggles and joys along the journey of learning.

I recently read that in the *darkest night*, the *stars shine* brightest.

I learnt a tremendous amount of lessons during my journey, and I hope that I can share some of these with you.

Learning and the seeking of knowledge should help in transforming us as individuals.

Knowledge is not about transmission of information, but transformation of hearts and minds.

We are not a commodity suitable only for economic machinery, but are humans that can help transform the world.

We can help heal the pains and wounds of the world through our humanity.

Knowledge should help us build bridges of understandings between people.

It should allow us to engage in dialogue and break down stereotypes.

Study may lead us to acquire knowledge, but the world today lacks wisdom.

To acquire knowledge, one must study; to acquire wisdom one must observe with humility.

The difference between knowing and being wise is summed humorously thus: "Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad." ~ Miles Kington¹

Eastern civilisation have always categorised knowledge into useful and harmful. One that leads to arrogance, self-conceit, and destruction of our earth is harmful.

The philosopher George Bernard Shaw once said: 'beware of false knowledge it is more dangerous than ignorance.'²

Most importantly, my learning journey taught me about our interconnectedness of peoples, nations and civilisations.

It taught me that the 'East and West have been fundamentally and consistently interlinked through globalisation ever since 500 CE...and as Ancient Greek civilisation was in fact significantly derived from Ancient Egypt...the East provided a crucial role in enabling the rise of modern Western civilisation.'³

Furthermore, 'History cannot be written as if it belonged to one group [of people] alone. Civilisation has been gradually built up, now out of the contributions of one [group], now of another.'⁴

Destructive stereotypes, including racism, bigotry, and prejudice that one group or person displays toward another are often born in spaces of non-contact, adversarial contact, or ignorance.

It, therefore, becomes imperative that our knowledge empowers us to engage in dialogue and understanding of the 'other.'

We become enriched in our own traditions and viewpoints by actively engaging with the 'other'.

The very opposite of this is exclusion.

¹ <http://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/knowledge.html>

² George Bernard Shaw (2015). "The Collected Works of George Bernard Shaw: Plays, Novels, Articles, Lectures, Letters and Essays: Pygmalion, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Candida, Arms and The Man, Man and Superman, Caesar and Cleopatra, Androcles And The Lion, The New York Times Articles on War, Memories of Oscar Wilde and more", p.5797, e-artnow

³ John M. Dobson (2004), *The Eastern origin of Western civilisation*. Cambridge University Press, p.2.

⁴ Ruth benedict in Dobson (2004), p.1.

Exclusion often entails cutting the bonds of humanity that connect us as moral human beings and can generate a wide range of emotional responses, from hatred to indifference, and even the cursing of or killing of the other.⁵

Let us not be of those.

I hope that your journey of learning takes you far and wide, and makes you actors of positive change in the societies and world that we live in.

Congratulations once again, and have a great day.

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 75. On the different forms that exclusion and othering can take see Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67.