

Occasional Address by Ian Smith
University of South Australia Graduation Ceremony
Pridham Hall
Tuesday 30 September 2025

Graduates, your families and friends, special guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to provide this occasional address. I am deeply grateful to receive my fellowship and thank the Chancellor, Vic-Chancellor, council members and academic staff for their camaraderie during my time as UniSA.

But today is about you, the graduates. Congratulations. You look fabulous, and your job is well done.

I graduated 40 years ago, from the London College of Printing (now part of the University of the Arts, London) with a diploma in business and journalism. Highlighting my age, there were no journalism degree courses in 1984 as journalism was considered a trade.

So, with a diploma rather than a degree, I am a tad concerned addressing you is a bit like me, an amateur golfer with a poor handicap, giving advice to professional players.

I hope you take more away today from me than golfers would from my putting and bunker play.

Whatever level you attain, a tertiary education lays the groundwork for one's career.

While you have benefited from your time at UniSA, one of the world's great young universities, what lies ahead of you is even more exciting.

Entering the workforce is like boarding a mystery flight; an adventure with no certain destination.

ChatGPT says a graduate entering the workforce now can expect to experience around 12 different jobs up to the age of 54.

But while there will be twists and turns ahead, I wanted to give you two simple pieces of advice that I believe should remain as solid as the ground you tread over your careers.

Firstly, endeavour to be kind.

Secondly, try to listen to all points of view.

The stresses and demands that you will encounter in your careers will make what sounds simple in theory more difficult to follow in practice.

Amid our alarmingly divisive politics, poisonous debates where to be extreme is celebrated on social media platforms that have no boundaries, and society's tendency to knock down rather than pick up, never have these values been more important.

My late father ran printing businesses in London, and offers my anecdote about kindness.

He met people at all levels of business yet never differentiated based on seniority or roles.

As a child I fondly recall each October boxes would arrive at home filled with presents destined for his clients' Christmas trees. This was the late 1960s to early 1980s, so these boxes included Manikin cigars, Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes, Johnny Walker whisky, Gordons Gin, Chanel perfume and Old Spice aftershave.

Dad would get me to help wrap the presents. The gift a CEO received would be of no greater value than that given to the CEO's secretary. Due thought went into each personal gift. He knew his customers' tastes by knowing each of them.

Dad did the printing for Harrods in London, arguably the most famous store in the world. A bottle of whisky would go to the executive who managed all of Harrods' procurement, and hence approved payments to my father's business, while the doorman at Harrods' door 10, where my father could park his car for each visit, a wonderful man of Nigerian descent called Eddie Seraphim would receive a box of cigars.

Each relationship was equally important. He treated every person with the same respect and made each feel special. He made people feel seen, when others may not.

My advice does not stop at kindness, and by the way I am not advocating you buy people boxes of cigars and cigarettes in your future careers.

Listening is a similar quality that too often can be overlooked. Talking over others is the domain of insolence.

The most interesting people are the ones who show interest and listen to other opinions, and consider them, rather than simply spout their own.

It is said there is a reason why we have two ears and one mouth, and that is to use the former twice as much as we use the latter.

I was having a coffee with a very well-known former politician recently and discussed this speech.

He is great fun, and I enjoy his company, almost as much as he enjoys his own.

After a reminder that we were not having coffee to talk about him, I said, with some irony, that I thought we gave too much credence to those of extreme wealth, political power or influence.

In my career, from advising billionaires, chief executives, politicians and others of perceived importance, some of my greatest lessons have come from listening to those lacking status and the formal qualifications that we too often consider critical for one to be well versed.

Just because you have privilege, don't fall into the trap thinking you can't learn from others who may be far less fortunate in wealth or formal education.

When I was chairing Jirrawun Arts, the great indigenous artist Freddie Timms came down from the Kimberley. He was enjoying a drink at the Henley Beach Hotel with my friends. Bart, a successful advertising executive, asked Freddie if you were running from a crocodile wasn't it best to zig and zag, because crocodiles find it hard to change direction.

Freddie replied: "No, you climb up a tree".

My favourite lecture theatre is under a tree, listening to some of the 300,000 refugees in Kakuma refugee camp, just south of the Kenya-South Sudanese border. Learning from their stories, and hearing their opinions, would make us all better people.

I have taken both of my children to Kakuma, where many of the greatest lessons of my professional life have taken place. It was there where I thought my kids would receive unique insights that cannot be taught in a classroom.

In conversation in refugee camps, risk, resilience, ambition, love and good humour have often shone more brightly than I have seen in any boardroom or Cabinet room.

Believe me in saying the lessons from discussions like that will make you better at your jobs, as you widen a perspective on the world and don't limit it to your workplaces.

After 40 years listening to people in business, politics or thinktanks from both the Left or Right, I am of the view that they are frequently not the wisest, the smartest and certainly not always the most genuine.

Many have certainly earned their positions, and have done so deservedly on merit, but the best human qualities can be found in any corner of the world not just in the rooms where people consider themselves to be the most important.

Graduates, I wish you well today. I really do because, like every hard-working person, you deserve good things that come your way.

And as your careers take you to those different corners of this incredible and exciting world, I leave you with the very simple advice to keep your ears open more than your mouths and to smile wide to reflect your kind hearts.