

Occasional address: Dr Anne Summers
University of Western Sydney, 2007

Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic colleagues, special guests, ladies and gentlemen and – the most important group here today – graduands.

It is a great honour for me to be here today. It is always a privilege to be able to address new graduates on the very special occasion that marks the end of your formal studies, and the beginning of your journey through post-university life.

What I would like to do in the few minutes available to me today is to share with you a few thoughts about how to navigate that future.

The first thing I'd say is that you need to expect, and be prepared for, uncertainty. We can no longer predict the future with anything like the certainty that perhaps previous generations could rely on. So we need to be flexible and adaptable in order to deal with whatever comes our way.

The world continues to change very rapidly, in good ways and bad.

Not so good are the threats we face from climate change, from terrorism, from the rise of fundamentalism and from the large and growing gaps between the world's super rich and the very poor. This is something we also see in this country, especially in this city, and it flies in the face of the egalitarianism that we were once so proud of.

But many of the changes are of great benefit to us all.

We now take for granted the revolution in communications that allows us to so easily be in touch with family and friends wherever they might be. Email has changed our lives and enlarged our circles of friends and acquaintances. And how did we ever manage to get picked up at the airport before texting and mobile phones?

As a result of the communications revolution, the world operates at a dizzying pace. Recently the ABC showed a program about John Curtin, Australia's Prime Minister during the dangerous days of World War II when this country was threatened with invasion by the Japanese. It seems incredible today but back in 1942 he had to wait up to four days to get vital information he needed to make decisions about how to conduct the war. Today, that information would be transmitted instantaneously to our political leaders - and would most likely be broadcast live into our living rooms at the same time as our Prime Minister was learning the news.

We can sit at home with our computer and make friends, make money, make music, make movies and make fools of ourselves. All in our own room. We can chat to people, post videos, download movies for our entertainment, or search the libraries of the world for information.

As someone who has written five books, and is working on two others, I can tell you the astounding difference between researching now and back before the digital age. Once I would have had to travel to Canberra, or London, or wherever the information was, sit in an archive or a library, read the physical documents, take laborious notes which I would then feed into my work.

Today, I can sit in my study in Kings Cross, search the web, locate my document, download it, use Find and Key Word functions to rapidly scan for the particular

information I need, and then either store it or print it. I estimate that my research time has been reduced by at least 50 per cent as a result.

You will of course take all this for granted. You would not even know about, let alone remember, a world of card catalogues, telegrams and aerograms, telexes and teleprinters, roneos and telephone trees. My computer did not even know some of these words – wanting teleprompter instead of teleprinter, and Romeo for roneo!

And your kids will probably yawn when you try to explain to them about blogs, email or even the World Wide Web. When I first began working as the Bureau Chief in Canberra for the Australian Financial Review, in 1979, I typed my stories – on a typewriter! – then handed the copy to a teleprinter operator in the next room who retyped the story and transmitted it to Sydney where it was typed for the third time, this time by the typesetters who converted my copy into hot metal characters ready for the printing presses.

Today, the story is typed once, on screen, and that same text bounces from Canberra – or wherever – to the head office where it is edited and then transmitted electronically to Chullora, where the printing presses are.

Strangely enough, this process is actually slower than the days when it took three different people to type the same story. No one has ever been able to explain to me why deadlines have been brought forward since communications speeded up. Change is sometimes a mixed blessing.

Finally, I would like to remind you that wherever your working lives take you, you will also have relationships and families of your own and that this part of your lives will most likely be as challenging and demanding as anything you do at work.

One of the big issues facing all of us today is how to achieve the right kind of balance between our work and the other parts of our lives. These days, most professional jobs require people to work longer and longer hours, and this creates considerable pressure on us all. We want to do other things apart from work – sport, cultural activities, and further education perhaps. And often we have responsibilities - for children or for other family members, perhaps ageing parents - that we need time for. It is fair to say that our society still has not worked out how to get this balance right.

Whatever you decide to do, I wish each of you well in pursuing your dreams. Remember that life is short. Don't waste it doing something you don't enjoy. Decide what you want and go for it. Take risks. This is the only way to achieve success. You might fail the first time. If so, start again. Above all, enjoy the journey. And congratulations to each of you for the hard work that has got you to where you are today.

Adapted from the Occasional address by Dr Anne Summers AO, Ph.D
University of Western Sydney, 2007.