

University of Papua New Guinea

59th Graduation Ceremony on 11 April 2014

Address by

Ms Deborah Stokes, Australian High Commissioner

Acknowledge distinguished guests

Vice-Chancellor Prof Mellam

Distinguished guests

Graduands

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very honoured to speak at the University of Papua New Guinea's 59th Graduation Ceremony.

This is a special institution that holds an important place in Papua New Guinea's history, and its future.

'An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.' These are the words of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founders and authors of the US constitution. He was a philosopher, an inventor, a diplomat

and great advocate for democracy. Franklin knew a thing or two about knowledge.

That is what you are banking on and that is what Papua New Guinea is banking on.

Knowledge drives innovation, entrepreneurship and dynamism.

It also connects Papua New Guinea to the ever changing and increasingly connected global economy.

Papua New Guinea is benefitting from its vast natural resources but it will be its human resources that ultimately drive, shape and mobilise those benefits.

And higher education is the cornerstone of the skills needed for strong economies.

Skilled workforces are vital to productivity and innovation. They are central to a nation's competitiveness and progress.

Just as importantly, higher education helps define our societies, our values and fundamental principles.

It is a central element of our democracies and the institutions based on the rule of law.

Studies have shown the strong correlation between the number of years of education and the social and economic advantages for individuals and for society.

But it is not good enough for nations to just provide access to education.

It is important to also deliver a quality education.

Why is quality important? The business case is strong – it is because you get a better result for your investment.

Improved quality delivers better and more useful knowledge.

It also allows PNG to tap into the world's best minds through research, publications in international journals, policy debates and academic participation in international conferences and discussions.

The 2011 Namaliu-Garnaut Review of PNG universities found that although there was great demand for more university places, any increase in enrolment numbers needed to be matched by a commitment to lifting the quality of teaching and of institutions.

In response to the Review's recommendations, the governments of Australia and PNG agreed to support improvements to the quality of higher education, increasing the number of graduates and increasing women's access to higher education.

Australia remains committed to supporting PNG's quality agenda for higher education and to supporting the Office of Higher Education and the universities in Papua New Guinea.

Critical to meeting these goals is the quality assessment and each university's commitment to implementing the findings of the independent assessment.

I would like to congratulate the University of PNG for undertaking its first quality assessment and particularly recognise the stewardship provided by Vice Chancellor Mellam. This is a pivotal step and demonstrates that UPNG is investing in its students and the long term future of PNG.

Gender equality

You will soon receive your degrees and with this you will assume greater leadership responsibilities. What kind of leader is up to you.

As leaders, you can help to overcome one of PNG's major challenges and that is promoting equal opportunities for women.

This is not only about human rights and fairness. It also rests on a very strong business case.

International experience has shown that investing in the education of girls delivers immense economic and social benefits.

Indeed it is the single most important activity that any country can support.

The World Bank estimates that eliminating barriers to women's full participation can increase labour productivity by as much as 25 per cent.

Currently, Papua New Guinean women are less likely to attend university than men and in 2011, men represented two thirds of university enrolments.

PNG needs both men and women to be agents of change.

As a close friend and partner of PNG, Australia is committed to helping PNG improve opportunities for women.

Through our Australia Awards program, we ensure more than half of the scholarships we offer in Australia and PNG go to women.

I invite all of you today, especially the men, to demonstrate leadership in the 21st century by embracing gender equality in your work and in your communities.

New Colombo Plan

Australia and PNG have a shared history – and we hold shared values. And we have close interpersonal ties that we need to replenish these as each new generation comes along.

That is why I was pleased by the announcement by Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ms Julie Bishop, of the New Colombo Plan.

Under the New Colombo Plan, the Australian Government provides scholarships for Australian students to study at universities across the Asia Pacific region, including PNG.

Not only will it offer a great experience for those Australian students who come here – it will also improve our collaboration and relationships with our closest neighbour.

Conclusion

Graduation ceremonies are significant milestones.

They are the culmination of years of effort, sacrifice and commitment, by yourselves and your families.

Many others have contributed to your achievements.

The University's Council, lecturers, tutors, administrators, ancillary staff and the Student Representative Council, have all played a part. We owe all these people a debt of gratitude for your achievement today.

To the graduands, I say congratulations! You have completed a strenuous program of study.

Your hard work, commitment, and desire to improve yourself are the characteristics that all countries need.

You deserve to enjoy this moment. You have fulfilled your academic aspirations and those of your families.

But, and there's always a 'but'... as a highly educated person with a formal qualification you now have more important responsibilities than ever before.

In Papua New Guinea, to have a university degree, an achievement that is beyond the reach and imagination of most, is such a privilege.

It is also a responsibility.

You are leaders now and essential to your country's prosperity. You will help to shape the country that PNG will become in the next 40 to 50 years.

This responsibility is a heavy one but it is also one full of promise. There is no limit to the potential of this country – rich in resources, in cultural diversity and in natural beauty.

I wish you well as each of you plays your vital part.

Congratulations again. Well done on your marvelous achievement.