

**AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE OF LAW  
CONFERRAL OF AWARDS CEREMONY, 18 DECEMBER 2013,  
CANBERRA, ACT**

**The Past**

1. It was almost twenty years ago that I nervously sat where you are presently seated. In a strange case of history almost repeating, I had the pleasure of listening to The Hon Justice Mahla Pearlman AO, the then Chief Judge of the Land and Environment Court of New South Wales, speak during my awards ceremony. For those who knew her she was, and remains, despite her passing in late 2011, a remarkable and inspirational figure. I shall return to her later.
2. I confess to having been profoundly relieved to be in the audience awaiting the conferral of my law degree. I still recall my first day at the then ANU Law Faculty when the Sub-Dean gleefully asked us to “look at the person to the right of you, then look at the person to the left of you, because in five years’ time one of them won’t be there”! Fortunately, I was the person in the middle, and it appears that so were you.
3. So congratulations on making it! I know that the journey has been long. I know that the journey has been challenging. And I know that many of you, including long suffering family and friends, have sacrificed much to get here. Today marks the culmination of your hard work, of your diligence and of your persistence.

**The Present**

4. Be justifiably proud of your achievement. For you are now graduates of not just one of Australia’s top universities and law schools, but an internationally recognised university, consistently placed among the best for teaching, research and graduate employment opportunities.

5. Let me give you some statistics to make good this assertion. In the 2013/2014 *Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings*, ANU was ranked:<sup>1</sup>

- first nationally;
- 27<sup>th</sup> overall; and
- 14<sup>th</sup> globally in the field of “law and legal studies”.

This is out of more than 700 tertiary institutions worldwide.

6. According to the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* for 2013, ANU was ranked:<sup>2</sup>

- second nationally; and
- 48<sup>th</sup> in the world.

7. ANU was ranked third overall among Australian institutions in the 2012 *Excellence in Research for Australia Rankings*,<sup>3</sup> and the ANU College of Law was given a ranking of “5”, placing it in the “well above world standard” category - the highest available ranking.<sup>4</sup>

8. In terms of Australian law schools, ANU is currently ranked third in Australia, closely following the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney.<sup>5</sup> Its alumni presently sit on the High Court of Australia, the Federal Court of Australia, the Supreme Court of New South Wales and even, the Land and Environment Court of New South Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://cbe.anu.edu.au/news-events/cbe/news/2013/qs-rankings-2013/>; Australian Education Network, <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au>; <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings>; Simon Marginson, “We’re fighting above our weight when it comes to uni rankings”, *The Australian*, 18 July 2012 and <https://vcdesk.anu.edu.au/2013/09/10/world-university-rankings/>.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Education Network, <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au>.

<sup>3</sup> Released by the Australian Research Council that assesses the quality of research undertaken at Australia’s higher education institutions between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Education Network, <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au>.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Education Network, <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au>.

9. Finally, and no doubt of more pressing interest to many of you, is the fact that ANU is ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of graduate employability. Its placement in the list was the highest among all Australian universities.<sup>6</sup>
10. This is important because I am acutely aware that employment opportunities for law graduates as lawyers are currently limited and continue to diminish. I know that firms are recruiting less and that consequently the competition is increasingly fierce.
11. But there is a lot more to life, and to your future careers, than securing a position in a top tier commercial law firm, or any law firm for that matter, consumed, as they generally are, with billable units.
12. Like almost all worthy lessons in life, I learnt this the hard way. I lasted less than a year as a solicitor, encouraged to go to the bar by observing many of my friends who had chosen the road less travelled, by becoming journalists, policy advisers, foreign affairs and intelligence analysts, IT specialists, politicians, writers, bankers, accountants and academics. One became the High Commissioner to Botswana, another designed foreign exchanges for emerging eastern European economies and retired before the age of 40. Embedded in all this diversity was, however, one common element, namely, a law degree from ANU.
13. This is because, as you well know by now, law is a discipline, in every sense of the word. It requires, amongst other things, critical analysis, logic, reason, organisation, the ability to communicate well, and creativity. These are skills of universal application that will equip you for life, irrespective of your chosen profession.

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<sup>6</sup> John Elmes, "Global Employability University Ranking 2013 puts Oxford top of the World", *Times Higher Education*, 28 October 2013 at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/global-employability-university-ranking-2013/2008497.article>. The *Global Employability University Ranking* was conducted by French human resources consulting company, Emerging Associates, and a German polling and research institute called Trendence. It drew on responses from 2700 recruiters from twenty countries about which local universities were considered to produce the best graduates.

14. True it is that there were those in my graduating year who went on to become partners of law firms, successful barristers and even the occasional judge, but their contribution to society is no more or less worthy than any other. Each has made a difference; has left their mark.
15. And for those of you worried that your academic record reflects the fact that you spent more time at the Uni Bar or Peppercorn Café than the Law Library, let me assure you now that ultimately it does not matter. For this is not the end, this is the start. With a small measure of inspiration and a liberal dose of perspiration, your destiny awaits you.
16. This is as much a truism for those of you who seemingly have gilt-edged futures before you. For once the champagne stops flowing, the hard work begins anew.
17. This is because the path to success, both professional and personal, is full of obstacles. You will stumble. You will fall. You will make mistakes. You will have regrets, for decisions made and not made, for opportunities lost. I know this because I have had more than just “a few”.<sup>7</sup>
18. But each of you has the capacity to rise up, to learn, to overcome and to move forward. If you made it to this auditorium today, then there is every reason to presume that the road down which you choose to travel will be both fulfilling and enduring.
19. With reward, however, comes concomitant duties and obligations, both to others and to yourself. Some of these include, a duty not to compromise your integrity or values in the pursuit of prosperity. An obligation to be compassionate towards others less fortunate than yourself, and a duty, wherever possible, to offer assistance to those in need. An obligation to give back to the community by whatever means available. A duty to maintain relationships with family and friends, irrespective of how demanding your work

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<sup>7</sup> “Regrets, I’ve had a few”, lyrics from the Frank Sinatra song *My Way*.

is. And above all else, an obligation to be the happiest and healthiest you can be.

## The Future

20. I wish to return again to where I began. The Hon Mahla Pearlman AO was the very embodiment of some of the themes I have touched upon above. From an unassuming start in Boggabri, located in rural New South Wales, she rose to become the first female president of the Law Society of New South Wales, the first female head of a judicial jurisdiction and the first female President of the Law Council of Australia.<sup>8</sup> She was, in so many respects, a woman of 'firsts', but she was also someone who never forgot her humble beginnings, or her connection to the land, and who continued to serve, in whatever capacity she could, the various communities, legal and non-legal, that had been, directly or indirectly, instrumental in her numerous accomplishments.
21. However, we can all be men and women of 'firsts'. Indeed many of you already are if you are the first person in your family to graduate from law, or, as in my case, the first person in my family to graduate from university. For there exists an infinite number of 'firsts' and it is incumbent upon all of us to conceive them, to discover them, to create them and to achieve them, no matter how large, no matter how small. For, as the proverb tells us, mighty oaks from little acorns grow.
22. In this regard, this week saw one of the most extraordinary and influential leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nelson Mandela, laid to rest. I do not know if I shall bear witness to a human being of his colossal stature again in my lifetime. However, it is just possible that such a person is present amongst the graduates before me. I would like to believe so.
23. But whatever your aspirations, whatever your dreams, it is worth pausing for just a moment, before you commence your celebrations after this ceremony, to

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<sup>8</sup> "A first class lawyer of the land", (February 2012) *Law Society Journal* 32.

reflect upon the following words of that great man, Nelson Mandela. For not only are they presently apposite, they will continue to resonate loudly well into the future of everyone here tonight. He said this:<sup>9</sup>

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

24. It has been a great honour and privilege to be invited to address you today. It remains for me to once again congratulate you and to wish you, from one ANU law alumni member to another, all the very best for your long walk ahead.
25. Thank you.

**The Hon Justice Rachel Pepper**  
**Land and Environment Court of New South Wales**

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<sup>9</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (first published Little, Brown and Company, Great Britain, 1994. This ed, Abacus, 2013), 751.