

FLINDERS UNIVERSITY GRADUATION CEREMONY 12 MAY 2022 | OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

Dr Dale Lambert PSM FTSE in response to the presentation of an Honorary Award of Doctor of Science honoris causa from Flinders University

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Chancellor – Mr Stephen Gerlach AM, the Vice-Chancellor – Professor Colin Stirling, Deputy Vice-Chancellor – Professor Romy Lawson, Vice-President and Executive Dean – Professor Alistair Rendell, University Council members, University staff, the family and friends of graduates, and most especially, the graduates whom I will focus on today.

As this is a College of Science and Engineering ceremony, I thought I would present a simple, easy to remember equation. That equation is

$$\text{Career} = \text{Capability} + \text{Opportunity}.$$

To explain this equation, I begin with a quote from a 1987 Harvard Business Review article called “Crafting Strategy” by Henry Mintzberg. He writes,

“At work, the potter sits before a lump of clay on the wheel. Her mind is on the clay, but she is also aware of sitting between her past experiences and her future prospects. She knows exactly what has and has not worked for her in the past. She has an intimate knowledge of her work, her capabilities, and her markets. As a craftsman, she senses rather than analyses these things; her knowledge is “tacit.” All these things are working in her mind as her hands are working the clay. The product that emerges on the wheel is likely to be in the tradition of her past work, but she may break away and embark on a new direction. Even so, the past is no less present, projecting itself into the future.”

Mintzberg’s story has two principal ingredients:

- The first is capability, which is represented by the potter’s past experience.
- The second is opportunity, which is represented by the new piece of clay that the potter is about to mould.

The product of the next potter’s work will be the collision of these two things:

- the capability that she brings from her past, and
- the opportunity that is presented by the peculiarities of that new piece of clay.

Like Mintzberg’s pottery tale, your career will be a collision of these two things: capability and opportunity.

Capability is about what you are able to do. Universities are all about building capability and, in that respect Flinders University afforded me a world-class education. Two examples.

My Computer Science honours thesis supervisor undertook a sabbatical at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or MIT, the university ranked number 1 in the QS World University Rankings, and as a consequence the MIT professor who invented the subject of my thesis actually marked my honours thesis. My omniscient PhD supervisor lectured in both Philosophy and Computer Science, and gave postgraduate Mathematics lectures while on sabbaticals at Stanford University, ranked number 3 in the QS World University Rankings. A university developed capability arms you with the ability to conceptualise, or as Bertrand Russell described it, with ways of viewing the world, and this gift of conceptualisation will pervade every aspect of your life. So, to the graduates assembled here today, you have done a very wise thing by completing your science and/or engineering program at Flinders. You have established a bedrock capability that will stand you in good stead for the rest of your lives.

But just like the potter in Mintzberg's tale, your capability will confront opportunity, and on that front my message to you today is to expect the unexpected. My career provided opportunities that were completely unimaginable while I was building my capability at Flinders. My Artificial Intelligence system was embedded into an airborne Swedish radar system to defend Sweden, but it was also subsequently used to curb rainforest logging in Brazil; a US intelligence agency invited me to address a request they received from President Obama; I supervised staff with PhDs in everything from Quantum Physics to Sociology; and for two years I chaired the advisory board for the largest set of Defence science programs between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. I expected none of these opportunities. As your capability confronts new opportunities, your career becomes the cascading effect of the interdependency between capability and opportunity. The opportunities you choose breed new capabilities that in turn expose new opportunities, and the cycle repeats.

So, if you want an amazing career, think about the career equation formed from capability and opportunity. Like Mintzberg's potter, build your capability and embrace the new opportunities that will further enhance your capability.

In closing, I wish you, the Flinders graduates assembled here today, all the very best for your cascading careers. Thank you.

12 May 2022