

Adaptive leadership and managing in a global crisis

Monday, 30 November, 2020

Graduation ceremony of the Defence and Strategic Studies course

Adams Theatre, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra

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As Vice-Chancellor of Deakin University, it is my very great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony, and to have the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

Deakin University is proud to partner with the Australian War College to offer courses that prepare graduates for strategic level roles which support Australia's national security and enhance our country's strategic capability.

We are also proud to work with an organisation that offers educational opportunities to international students, and in doing so enhances Australia's strategic engagement with key international partners and allies.

At Deakin, we are currently working closely with the Federal Government and other education institutions, to develop a model of higher education that ensures universities continue to offer what Australia needs and clearly articulates the longstanding tripartite contract tended to by students, universities and the Commonwealth for more than 60 years.

Our partnership with the Australian War College is a powerful example of our collaborative endeavours in this evolution.

One of Deakin's core strategic aims now, and in the coming years, is helping to ensure a secure Australia.

This has been identified as one of five central pillars of our scholarship activities over the next decade, along with other vital national priorities including: improving the health and wellbeing of communities, advancing society and culture, and enabling a sustainable world.

The central role national security plays in our organisational strategy demonstrates how important we consider the work of the Australian War College and broader Australian Defence College, and the work you are undertaking in your studies and in your careers.

This year, 2020, is a year unlike any others. None of you will forget the year you completed the Defence and Strategic Studies Course!

I won't go through all the ways this year has changed our lives. But I will highlight three issues that I hope you will agree, directly link to what you have studied across this year.

Firstly, adaptive leadership is the hallmark of great leadership.

More than 140 years ago the Prussian commander Helmuth von Moltke commented that "no plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force". Whether that 'enemy' is a virus, a cyber-threat or more traditional force, the need to adapt and respond has never been more evident.

This year has required adaptation, flexibility, responding to continual disruption and change, and being able to reimagine old ways of doing things. We have all realised that to make decisions in the face of incredible uncertainty we must also have a very strong sense of those values and characteristics that must remain unchanged.

Secondly, lessons learned cannot be lessons forgotten.

If a vaccine returns the world to a version of pre-COVID normal, it would be remiss of you as national and international leaders to forget the lessons learned this year and return to old practices, assumptions and worldviews. These valuable lessons – learned through difficulty and stress – will inform our future attitudes and decisions about how we respond, how we apply new understandings, and how we utilise technology.

Finally, scenario planning is important.

We did not plan to have a global pandemic at the start of 2020. Indeed, a set of scenarios we considered at the very end of 2019 were considered too extreme by many who looked at them and yet what has happened this year has combined many of them. Such an event should not have been out of the realm of possibility for leaders looking to the future.

What will be the next COVID-like event in the coming years and what preparations must we have in place to lead, and lead well?

Graduands, you have worked hard towards achieving the success we celebrate here today.

My sincere congratulations to you on completing the Defence and Strategic Studies Course. I also offer my congratulations to those who have completed the course requirements for postgraduate degrees, and my encouragement to those continuing students who are still striving to complete their studies.

We hope you are now equipped with the additional skills required to build on your careers, to seek those higher leadership roles, and to navigate the greater complexity and demands that lie ahead.

We expect that in spending this year on the course you have developed a network that crosses service, organisation and national boundaries, and that this network will assist you in the challenging work ahead.

We believe that your experience on the DSSC will empower you to make the most of new opportunities with the knowledge that you are ready, and the resilience that will enable you to manage additional responsibility, and overcome further challenges and any unexpected setbacks.

Deakin University has always been a champion of lifelong education, and we aim to instil this value into all of our students, recognising that beyond their graduation ceremonies, the world will demand of them an open and adaptive mindset, an innovative and diplomatic disposition, and a strong and persistent appetite for learning.

We are confident that talented and experienced leaders such as yourselves will drive the realisation of Australia's national security and that of our partners and allies, fostering the creativity and skills which will generate the new ideas and enterprise necessary to face the global security challenges of the 21st century.

Graduands, I congratulate you all.