MR SIMON MCKEON AO, Chancellor of Monash University

PROFESSOR ABID KHAN, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President of Global Engagement

MEMBERS OF THE UNIVERSITY’S COUNCIL

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, PROFESSORS, MEMBERS OF FACULTIES, AND IN PARTICULAR TODAY’S GRADUATES

FAMILIES, FRIENDS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

First, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the people of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and to any elders with us this afternoon.

Congratulations to each of you for the success you have achieved. It is another milestone in your life’s journey. Your success brings much joy to your family and friends. I am sure they are most proud of you.

I am informed that there are 424 graduates representing 47 countries here today – a truly united nation of graduates! You now join more than 350,000 alumni of Monash University worldwide.

Many of you will return to your home country. Some of you will continue with studies. Others will enter the work force. It sounds overwhelming
but it will definitely be an exciting time in the next stage of your career.

Looking back at my own journey, I arrived in Melbourne from Malaysia in early 1982 to commence my tertiary education at Monash University. It was the first time I had travelled to another country.

Like most students of Asian background, I was expected to work hard, find a way to support myself and at the same time obtain excellent grades! I suspect quite a few of you know the drill!

I worked at various jobs - as a cleaner; gardener; kitchen hand. During the summer, I worked in factories and farms. A good day’s labour for an honest wage. These experiences would prepare me for the challenges and road ahead.

Back in the eighties, there were few lawyers of Asian descent practising in Victoria. Although I could have returned to Malaysia to commence my legal career, my time at Monash University changed my outlook and aspirations to what was possible.

Perhaps it was simply youthful naivety but I took instead the audacious step of having as my goal to practise as a barrister at the Victorian Bar. This, I did in 1988 when there were no practising barristers of Chinese descent in Australia.

I would like to share with you the stories of two men who inspired me not the least because both were barristers and both also named William.
The first is William Ah Ket who was the first barrister of Chinese descent in Australia. He was born in Wangaratta in 1876. He completed his articles at Maddock & Jamieson, and signed the Victorian Bar roll in 1904. From what I have read, Ah Ket built a successful practice at the Victorian Bar and was a very able advocate appearing on numerous occasions in the High Court of Australia.

In Sydney, there was William Lee, born in 1912 and died in 2010, who had the distinction of being the second barrister of Chinese descent in Australia. He was sent to Hong Kong for six years to obtain a classical Chinese education. Following his return to Sydney in 1929, it took him some nine years of further education before being admitted to the New South Wales Bar in 1938.

Both barristers, despite being born and brought up in Australia, faced many challenges as they practised at a time when the *Restrictive Immigration Act 1901 (Cth)* was in force, facing discrimination and prejudice, in a highly conservative profession.

For example, William Ah Ket reputedly won the Victorian Supreme Court Prize but was denied conferment of the award on the official board. His award was later established through Court Library records, which showed that Ah Ket received prize money for an award, which even so was less than the official prize amount. So, not only was he denied official recognition, his achievement was valued as lesser.

William Lee was a strong advocate for equal pay for Chinese workers and passionately defended the Chinese who failed the migrant dictation test.
(which in those days resulted in a criminal charge and deportation). He was determined to remedy injustice.

Both men demonstrated courage, determination and grit in the face of challenges beyond their control. They succeeded and were masters of their own destiny, in a world that often determined to refuse them that privilege.

The lives of William Ah Ket and William Lee were the inspiration and spurred others and I to establish the Asian Australian Lawyers Association in 2013, which now has over 500 lawyers as members across Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, with a branch in Perth soon to be established.

The William Ah Ket Scholarship will soon be launched and the William Lee Oration was recently held in Sydney, recognizing their contribution and legacy. Both these programs aim to encourage cultural diversity in the legal profession.

For over 28 years, I would like to think that I have built a healthy practice at the Victorian Bar. As a young barrister, I often travelled to country Victoria to argue cases. At times my appearance, it could be said was a curiosity. A Chinaman in Court at the Bar table in Maryborough Magistrates’ Court was not an everyday occurrence!

As I gained more experience as an advocate by practising my craft, I was entrusted with more varied and complex cases. The process of preparing for a case is, however, relentless and requires an enormous amount of
time, effort and concentration. It is the drive and determination to do my best that keeps me focused.

Over the last two decades, I have also been fortunate to work with several eminent Senior Counsels. I am grateful for their mentoring as they have helped me not only to improve my skills but to gain confidence.

The journey has certainly not been without roadblocks, detours or pit stops. There were times I thought I had reached the end of the road. At other times, the way ahead was not always so clear. I knew that I had the physical endurance but it was the mental endurance that tested my metal and helped built grit.

It takes a lifetime to acquire one’s craft and one is constantly learning. Monash University’s motto “Ancora Imparo”, i.e. “I am still learning” is apt and a reminder that learning is a journey that is as individual as each of you, and as enriching as you wish it to be. Above all, learning is about discovering your humanity.

Your graduation today demonstrates that you have in measure persevered and succeeded in achieving a milestone in your journey. Each of you has the ability and with effort, the right mindset and work ethic you are ready for the next stage of life.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you five things I have learned in my journey.

First, set some goals for the next few years. Without goals, you have
nothing for which to aim. Work hard to get there. If you don’t achieve them don’t give up. Persevere. Acquire grit. Failure is but a step towards success.

Second, spend time with your family and mates. Time and mateship is something we cannot re-create. There is no “Back to the Future”. Once we lose time, it is gone forever. Your family and mates are all that really matter.

Third, learn to give. Give of yourself, your time, and your resources. Be generous in a world starved of kindness. You are the collective future of our tomorrow so aim to contribute positively to make a difference, as did William Ah Ket and William Lee.

Fourth, cultivate strong values. The very Australian values of egalitarianism and giving everyone a “fair go” embody equality, mutual respect, tolerance, humility and compassion.

My wife often says that “having good values is not just what you will do but it is also what you will not do”. Be steadfast and firm in your values. Call out injustice. Have the courage to stand for and do what is right.

Finally, be true to yourself. It is your life, your destiny.

Graduates, your future is how you see it to be.

Thank you.