



## Sanushka Seomangal speaking notes to The University of Sydney graduating class of 2021 – 8 December 2021

Thank you.

It is a singular honour for me to be here today, and to share in your celebrations.

Congratulations to each of you – today is indeed one of those days during the course of your lives that you will look back on with great pride. A university degree, in any place in the world, is a great achievement. In some places in the world, it is still among the most aspirational, yet unachievable, of dreams. In that context, you should savour this moment – take it in - you are among the privileged few to be conferred with your graduate and post graduate degrees by one of the best academic institutions in the world (I'm only a little biased).

When I was asked to deliver this address, I must admit that I was a little nervous. What could I possibly say to you – most of my learning comes from people like you. But, it presented me with an opportunity to reflect, on my own graduation, many years ago, and with the benefit of hindsight, 4 words that sum up this moment came to my mind:

**The first word is Gratitude** – while each of you is sitting there in your cap and gown, having just been conferred your degree, this moment is not just about you alone. It is also about each of those people sitting at the back, watching on the video stream, waiting somewhere outside this great hall – your friends, families, partners, teachers, mentors, peers – success is never achieved alone. You sit here today because you have also been lifted up and carried forward by all those people. So today is a day to be thankful – to and for each of those special people in your lives, for their sacrifice, and their unfailing support, in good times and bad. This village that brought you to today, will help you face the greater challenges that lie ahead. And I assure you, the challenges ahead are great. Success may sometimes feel elusive, but with your village around you, success will not be an impossible dream. So ensure you take a moment today, to reflect on your village, and to thank them – for today would not be possible without them.

**The second word is Privilege** – each one of us here enjoys a certain level of privilege. For example – I have the privilege of my heritage - I am a third generation South African, of Indian origin, who has made my home in Australia. I have the privilege of my upbringing – from doting parents who made me keenly aware of how fortunate I am to enjoy the privileges I do. I have the privilege of my education, and the privilege of my profession. What does this all mean? It means that in this moment, as in every significant

moment in my life, it is a reminder to me of how grateful I should be, must be, for my privilege. But also a reminder that I have not just a duty, but a responsibility (**that's the third word**) to make a contribution to something greater than myself. As, do you.

**Responsibility** - What am I trying to say then? That because of what you have achieved today, there is more work for you to do tomorrow? Yes, that's exactly it. It is people like you, like me – who enjoy this privilege, that have a responsibility to use what we have – whether it is our platform, our voice, our education – to make a difference to someone somewhere, who doesn't. With the foundation of your degrees, look outside the narrow walls of the worlds we sometimes find ourselves pigeonholed in, where we are defined almost solely by our professions - find a project, find an interest, think laterally – where is there a need? who can you impact? how? The answers to those questions may surprise you. Some of the most fulfilling moments through the course of my career have been in areas unconnected to my profession – areas where we are making a difference – improving diplomatic relations, having impact on public policy education, mentoring young women from diverse and challenging backgrounds.

**The fourth word is Opportunity** – today is also one of the few times in your life where you can aspire to do and be anything you want to. So, fill your world with fun. Fill your circle with people from all walks of life – there are lessons to be learnt from everyone. Open your minds to the possibilities – to the opportunities - that having that degree brings. Don't let yourself be defined by others or by what's acceptable or appropriate – define yourself, chart your own course, navigate your own journey. The opportunities are myriad – don't allow yourself to steamroll ahead with blinkers on, for you will miss those opportunities.

To the business graduates – congratulations – use these learnings and make our businesses and organisations more efficient and productive (read profitable).

#### **I speak now to the law graduates:**

To those of you who have figured out what comes next, whether it is a role in a law firm, or with a regulator or government department, or otherwise, congratulations! That is indeed another wonderful achievement. To you I will say, be prepared for one of the most humbling experiences of your life. When I started as a graduate lawyer, I thought I had arrived – I also thought that I was reasonably smart. Within my first 6 months, I thought – gosh I have no idea what I'm doing – two law degrees in two countries, and I'm incapable of writing a coherent email – what was I thinking becoming a lawyer?! That too shall pass. Surround yourself with people who will provide you with the support you will need, who are not just there with you for the wins, but most especially, who are there to hold you up through the losses. And there will be many.

To those law graduates who have not yet secured what comes next, that's alright - that too will come – there is a time for everything, and everything has its time. I know you're probably sitting there thinking – what would she know? Her career is all figured out. On one level that's true - this here is a far more polished and more experienced version of who I was when I was sitting where you are today. However - it took me two years and countless (did I say countless?) COUNTLESS rejection letters before I landed a graduate role at a law firm. With the number of rejection letters I received daily – and I received those by post - I felt like Harry Potter in the first movie – you know the scene where the letters are coming through the fireplace? Yes, that was me. It was demoralising, to say the least. But, I had a goal – I wanted to be a capital markets lawyer at a large law firm in Sydney – and so, I picked myself up, dusted myself off, tried some different things, persevered, and eventually, it worked. When the time was right, it worked. If I could do it, anyone can. Would I do it differently, if given a different choice? – Definitely not. The lessons I learnt through that journey is what made me who I am today. [And, I like me.]

As graduates – we are in the 1%, we are all highly educated, highly accomplished professionals. So in my view, we all have not just an individual responsibility to do and be better, and contribute to something greater than ourselves, but a collective responsibility as well. We are part of an elite community – a community of influencers - with the means and the might to have impact and make a contribution to change. What remains for us to determine is the choice we make about the kind of contribution we want to make. I feel hopeful about the contribution that I know you will make.

Thank you.