Firstly I would like to offer my congratulations to the graduates. It is a great honour to be invited to give the Occasional Address and to share in the celebration of your achievements. It wasn't luck that brought you here this evening, but hard work. You have shown you are capable of setting goals, applying yourselves, and undoubtedly overcoming obstacles to ultimately succeed in your endeavours. Your success was not however achieved in isolation so tonight take time to thank and acknowledge those family members, teachers and colleagues who accompanied you on your journey of discovery providing their support, guidance and friendship.

Tonight marks the beginning of a new phase in your lives, wether you are to join the workforce or are commencing graduate studies you will all be facing new opportunities which I know a degree from Curtin University has prepared you for. We face many challenges in our global future as social and technological changes gather pace and in your working future there will be career choices not even thought of yet. For our families this changing career path may be hard to understand. Many of our parents chose a career and stuck with that until they retired. Today having one career is becoming less common. For many of us what we thought would be a lifelong career choice is not what we are going to end up doing. This was certainly my case and I have had a rather circuitous rout to becoming an academic. I would like to share with you some of this journey and some of the things I have learnt along the way.

In your quest to be best you must start by doing what is necessary and for me that was a certificate in nursing, – a qualification that no longer exits. My mother had a lifelong career as a nurse and she encouraged me to follow that career path. She was raised during the Great Depression and saw her father go
through periods of unemployment and was determined that this was not going to happen to her or her children. My mother realised during the 1970s that technology was changing the job market, there was a fear that technology would take away many jobs and my mothers rationale for choosing nursing was that this was an area least likely to be dominated by machines and provided job security. This was not my dream - I wanted to be an Egyptologist, but at 17 the job prospects for an Egyptologist living in Sydney looked slim and I really had no thought of what else to do so nursing seemed to be a practical choice while I worked on my career plan. Many people now ask me if I felt I’d wasted the years I was a nurse and the answer is a resounding NO. I loved nursing and it gave me what I have now learned are termed transportable skills. I cannot emphasize too much how important every learning opportunity is to your development. I very much doubt I could have achieved a PhD without the time management and prioritizing skills I learnt as a nurse.

Most importantly I learnt to work in a team. Today a graduate needs skills marketable to a variety of employers rather than employer-specific training and developing a strong team culture is important in whatever field you are in. Successful teams are built on the basis of respect for every member’s contribution, no matter if that person has a degree or not. Today, with better communications and transportation options then ever before you are more likely to be a participant in an International team, with team members often based in different countries. Remember you are all working towards common goals and shared purposes - different is not inferior. As well as promoting an organisation a team also benefits you in providing new learning experiences, a sense of belonging and commitment.
The nursing profession was changing in the late 80’s and it was recognized that the health profession needed a Highly Skilled Workforce. Caught up in this change I realised if I was going to continue as a nurse I needed a University qualification and so with the encouragement of my husband I entered University with the firm intention of staying a health professional – I commence a Bachelor of Science (psychology) at Macquarie University in NSW with the aim of becoming a genetic councillor. As some of you here tonight have probably experienced my first choice was not to be and my major and I had to change my expectations of what my degree would involve.

This brings us to step 2: doing what is possible. Some times our dreams don’t match the reality of our skill set. Despite my desire to enter the counselling profession and hard work it appears I am a problem solver and this is not a good character trait for a councillor. I am grateful to the lecturer who told me, with compassion, that this career choice was not the right one for me and emphasised that I had other talents. A change of plan is not a failure – it is recognition that there are more opportunities then you previously realised. Do not be afraid to take advice. Good advice from a mentor is everything so be mentored by those who are in a position to do so and also be prepared to give generously of your knowledge and experience to mentor others. Sharing your knowledge and experiences will make the world a better place.

I would like to say that at this point I developed a great burning ambition to be a palaeontologist and progressed towards my goal but I must confess I was bitterly disappointed and without a goal for some time. My brilliant career plan was in disarray as was my undergraduate degree, my husband having decided to take up a job in Western Australia. So with no real goal I moved to the other
side of the country with most of a science degree and no idea what I was going to do with it. I ended up with a major in biochemistry and have never worked in that field.

So how do you go from a major in biochemistry to palaeontology? Enthusiasm is often neglected as a force, yet without it there would be few achievements. Enthusiasm, sets fire to the imagination and it was the enthusiasm of Prof. John Long at the WA Museum where I was working as a volunteer who inspired me to become a palaeontologist. Never underestimate the influence you can have on others by your attitude and approach to everyday tasks. John always looked ecstatic at work – he really enjoyed what he did. I still had no idea what I was going to do with my degree and John encouraged me to come and try palaeontology. He just assumed I’d love it and I did. So for those of you sitting out there tonight still not sure what you want to do with your degree do not despair but be open to suggestions and trying other experiences. Sometimes it is good to say YES – even if you are not sure that’s what you want to do. When you are open to seeing opportunity, more choices will be presented towards you. Through experience you will spot out the good opportunity from the bad ones. When you see an opportunity take action. For those of you who have a passion – share it and be inspirational to others.

That’s how I became a palaeontologist, a career I love. I find research exciting, especially when you discover a new fossil never described before. There are several things that continue to attract me to palaeontology. The first is that it brings together lots of different kinds of ideas and information to bear on a particular question. Palaeontologists take many disciples and bring them together under one umbrella. To be able to do this you need to know something
of geology, chemistry, biology, and ecology. If you can’t decide on a particular discipline then palaeontologist is the job for you!

Sometime it is a long and arduous research trail and often there are misleading side turns and unexpected obstacles. Sometimes I have discovered that some of the answers I got were not to the questions that I actually asked. This was definitely the case with the discovery of the oldest vertebrate embryo. Our research team was not looking for this at all, but the last bath in acid revealed something amazing and unexpected and changed the whole concept of reproduction in early fish. This is still my most exciting find. It is extremely satisfying knowing that I could make real and important contributions to science.

I thing I love most about my work is the learning. When you are just starting out it's hard to know what's new and if you are discovering something. When you make a discovery, it's yours, and whether you are doing it yourself, or reading someone else's work, it is new to you, and so it is your personal discovery, and your growth. As you have move through your studies and into a career you will also move from being primarily a recipient of knowledge to someone who could make unique contributions to knowledge. I find it very exciting and rewarding to be a contributor, even in a very small way, to the ongoing efforts of science to better understand our world and its past history. I would like to emphasize the importance of being a contributor.

Through your efforts to date you have found some of the answers you needed. It will always be impossible to say that you have all the answers of course but you,
I know, will continue to seek solutions in the years to come. As life patterns become more complex and less predictable with increased job changes, greater geographical and social mobility and more frequent family changes, you will need ever-greater skills and knowledge to remain successful, fulfilled and independent. Your University degree is the foundation for this and your successes to date show that you will be capable of handing the challenges of the future.

Finally, I would like you to take as your motto the words Alvin Toffler, Futurist & Author “The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

To all of you I wish a successful future and rewarding careers.