

## News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 97):

### Occasional Address at the University of Newcastle

#### Graduation Ceremony

04 January 2023

Although some of my colleagues are not still aware of this, one of the most important aspects of a diplomat's work is public speaking. Even after mastering the language, culture and customs of a country, it is another thing altogether to deliver a speech which responds to the audience's thoughts, and deepens their empathy and understanding of Japan, and could possibly resonate deeply with them. It takes many years of training and experience to ensure that speeches have their intended effect on an audience, so that diplomats may not be dismissed as simply agents of rhetoric.

#### 1. University graduation ceremonies

When I was posted to Australia, a seasoned diplomat from a nation friendly to Japan gave me the following piece of advice, "Shingo, while you are in Australia, it's a good idea to aim to deliver a speech both at the National Press Club and at the graduation ceremony of a major university."

Canberra's National Press Club is both the prestigious and challenging setting for a public speaker in Australia. Speeches there are broadcast live all over Australia, and there is a fair amount of pressure, too. I was lucky enough to be afforded this valuable opportunity in July 2021, which I touch on in [News From Under the Southern Cross \(Edition 23\)](#). Speaking places are very much limited; in the two years since my arrival, the only other Ambassadors given this opportunity were the French, Chinese and Ukrainian Ambassadors.



My speech at the National Press Club

On the other hand, no matter the university, graduation ceremonies are the most important events in the academic calendar. This is a proud day for students who managed to digest the strict university curriculum and receive their testamurs, and for those parents and family members who supported them both materially and emotionally throughout university life. It makes a stark contrast from Japanese universities which place more emphasis on their entrance ceremonies.

## 2. The University of Newcastle

Readers might be wondering why the University of Newcastle invited the Ambassador of Japan to their graduation ceremony. At first, it was not so clear to me either!

When I visited Newcastle in January 2022, I was fortunate enough to meet and exchange opinions with a number of local representatives and University of Newcastle academics who are passionately pursuing the introduction of hydrogen as an energy source. Let's just say that this business trip paid off!

I heard that those from the University might be interested in my academic record that includes the University of Tokyo's Faculty of Law and Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and a stint teaching international law at the Tokyo University Graduate School of Public Policy. Hence, they would expect me to tell stories that are somewhat different from those of other Ambassadors.

What is more, Vice-Chancellor Professor Alex Zelinsky AO - who specialises in systems engineering, computer science and robotics – was once a researcher at University of Tsukuba, and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Global Professor Kent Anderson also held a teaching position at Hokkaido University. All of these were likely factors in my being chosen to speak.

## 3. Revisiting Newcastle

Keeping in mind that advice from my diplomatic colleague, as soon as I received the invitation from the University of Newcastle, I immediately seized the opportunity. Yet actually travelling to Newcastle is no mean feat. It takes around 5-6 hours to drive there from Canberra.



The location of Newcastle (edited from a map on the NSW State Government Website)

Ordinarily, it would have been much easier to fly there. However, since the pandemic, airfares have skyrocketed, coupled with some tightening of the purse strings when it comes to business trips. So, despite the toll it would take on my body, I embarked on a road trip to Newcastle for the Graduation Ceremony.

Newcastle is a city located in the north of New South Wales, and is well-known for its long-running coal port, making this area a key part of Japan-Australia trade relations. The night before the graduation ceremony, I was pleased to have the opportunity to engage in deep discussion with some Japanese residents of Newcastle involved in the coal trade.



The stunning Port of Newcastle

By the way, around 70 per cent of Japan's coal imports come from Australia, and a large portion of these are shipped from the Port of Newcastle. It was here in Newcastle – on the front lines of the coal trade - that I learned that, needless to say, in achieving decarbonisation to move away from fossil fuels is necessary, but though what is required is a gradual and realistic approach.

#### 4. The day of the ceremony

And now for the day of the ceremony. In actual fact, graduation ceremonies see a great number of students individually ascend the stage to receive their testamurs; therefore, around ten different ceremonies were held over three days from 12-14 December. And it goes without saying that a magnificent cast of ten guests speakers were called upon to make the occasional addresses, this time including former prime minister Julia Gillard. That someone like me was included in this ten made me feel a tad daunted!

The ceremony at which I gave my remarks was on the morning of 14 December, and attended by around 350 graduands. The large hall – with a capacity of 1,200 – was just about full to the brim with the students, their parents and friends.



Views of the Graduation Ceremony

Wearing an academic robe, I entered the hall alongside the Chancellor, Mr Paul Jeans, and Vice-Chancellor Zelinsky, and delivered my address. Thinking that the standard remarks might fall a little flat, I put aside my pride and narrated my experiences of failing an entrance exam and the struggles of life as a government official – in doing so, introducing a few Japanese proverbs. These words are my gift to these young people setting out on their journeys into the society of tomorrow.



From left: Chancellor Jeans, Vice-Chancellor Zelinsky, myself, and the Graduate Speaker Ms Green.

I shared with the students several proverbs – ‘fall down seven times, get up eight’, ‘a frog in a well knows nothing of the great ocean’, ‘tide and time wait for no one’, and ‘when we are able to repay our parents, they are no longer with us’ – as if, looking back over my life so far, I was speaking to my own younger self. I felt grateful to see the how those kind hearted students’ eyes lit up as they listened attentively to my words. (You can read my occasional address [here](#).)



From left: Chancellor Jeans, myself and my wife and Vice-Chancellor Zelinsky.

One slightly disappointing aspect was that, although there were quite a few Chinese and Korean students among the 350 who received their testamurs that morning, I did not see one Japanese student in their midst. Thus, let us shout out to those back home – “O students of Japan, come down under!”

#### 5. The reception

I was particularly happy that, not only did I receive positive feedback from university staff, but also that some parents approached me afterwards to thank me for my speech.

Of these, one father – incredibly proud that his son had graduated – told me, “Your speech was very moving, thank you”. It is at times like these when I feel happiest to have taken up this post as Ambassador of Japan to Australia.

This was the last ‘big speech’ of 2022. This speech would not have been possible without the skill and in-depth knowledge of the locally engaged staff of the Embassy’s Cultural Section, who worked together with me to perfect the minutest of details.

Indeed, I feel a great sense of accomplishment.

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