

Venerable Chancellor,  
Venerable Mahasanga and the Clergy of Other Religions,  
Vice Chancellor, Deans of Faculties,  
Members of the University Council and Senate,  
Members of the Academic, Administrative and Non-academic Staff,  
Invitees, Parents, Well-wishers and Graduates.

First of all, may I extend my thanks to the Vice Chancellor, the Dean of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce and others, for the kind invitation extended to me to deliver this Convocation address.

A Convocation is an important occasion both to the University as well as the graduands and their parents, relations and friends. This day is the culmination of years of disciplined work and effort on the part of the graduands and we should also never forget the time and effort devoted for your benefit by your teachers. Your parents, your relations and various other persons would have also supported you in your efforts during these years. Therefore, while you justifiably rejoice in your hard won achievement to-day, you must also remember with a sense of gratitude, all those who have helped you to get to this position.

I understand that many or perhaps all of you are already professionals in different fields. Professionalism is not only about knowledge and skills. It is very much about attitudes and values, and one of the foremost values is a sense of gratitude and a realization that very little in life can be achieved alone, and without support and comfort from others.

There are other attributes of a professional. Discipline is one of them. Discipline as to time. Discipline as to dress. Discipline in respect of all aspects of work. Personal discipline in relation to food, sleep and leisure, and financial discipline. It is really personal discipline and the habits of concentration and focus that it gives that you will carry over to your work in society. Lax work habits and an haphazard work ethic derives from a lack of personal discipline. This, like most desirable things you need to work at. It will not come to you without persistence and effort.

Most of you will work in the field of management or related fields. Good management is not about solving problems. Good management is about having the foresight and the skills to prevent problems from occurring. Crisis management is also a form of management. But very often crises occur due to negligence, inattention, poor oversight and lack of anticipation. Under these circumstances,

crisis management may be necessary, but not always praiseworthy. It is an extremely costly exercise to solve a crisis that you have yourself created.

You will therefore have to build institutions and help to strengthen existing institutions. Over the last 25 years or so, we are going through a growing period where personalities dominate over institutions. Personalities are important. Particularly personalities who can provide strong leadership. But problems begin when personalities override institutions, weaken and disable them and erode the delicate checks and balances that sustain a healthy society. The result of such actions over time would bring instability, unrest, frustration, a sense of injustice and ultimately a disrespect of law and order. Good and healthy institutions, are the glue which binds society and strengthens social acceptance. Personalities must therefore extend the range and value of institutions and appreciate the real worth of structures and mechanisms that would outlast their own limited life spans.

This is something that would be wise to bear in mind, as you pursue your careers. Apart from routine work, and good routine is very important, you should strive to build something of lasting value, while discharging your responsibilities. This could be leadership towards engendering a culture of wide consultation before decisions are taken; a respect and a concern for those less privileged than you are, and setting standards of care towards your employees which go beyond minimum legal requirements; or establishing values and a culture which display a zero tolerance towards graft.

The range of things that you can do is quite large. What is necessary is to interpret your functions as a professional in order to build things of lasting value. The education that the University of Sri Jayawardenapura has provided, would have given you some of the tools necessary for your working life. But your professional duty is to deploy these tools not towards the pursuit of mere routine or self aggrandizement, but to bring your enterprises to a higher level of progress and sustainability. In order to do this, it is essential to combine knowledge with a strong system of values.

In my view, professionalism, values and leadership cannot be disaggregated. They constitute a dynamic whole. Professionalism is not only about knowledge and skills. It is not only about experience. All these have to be grounded on a value base. We talk about business ethics. We talk about transparency and accountability. We speak of good governance. None of these is possible without a solid base of values. You have to work out what your own bottom line is. You have to determine the line that you will never cross, whatever the incentives, whatever the

blandishments, whatever the temptation. Your professionalism, your capacity for leadership and indeed the quality of your leadership will depend upon that. I myself have determined this line for myself. On one occasion, I turned down a very lucrative offer of both position and wealth, because my sense of values did not permit me to accept a post in an area which I thought would be ultimately detrimental to people and to society. This is where you draw a distinction between what is legal and according to your lights what is moral. Please understand that if you are going to be a good professional, you must first be a good human being. And to be a good human being, you must have a sound moral base, a sound base of values and thresholds that you will never cross. You must become capable of this. If not, you will never be a good leader at a time when leadership is an increasing requirement of professional conduct. You cannot lead a team simply by precept. You will have to lead by example. People are very cynical about what you say, if your deeds don't match up to your words. Therefore, please understand that professionalism, values and leadership are not separable. If you don't integrate these three things you may be accommodated, you may be obeyed. You may even be feared. But you will never be respected. Respect has always to be painstakingly earned. However, powerful you may be, you cannot command respect. You may command fear, you may command obedience but never respect.

Finally, as trained and educated persons, I would ask you to contemplate our current society. When you do that, you are bound to see several areas of grave concern. You will notice unacceptable levels of violence; kidnappings; extortion; people taking the law into their hands and attacking persons and property, including Police stations; the serious problem of drugs and general criminal activities. You will see significant breakdowns in several sectors, which I need not enumerate since everyone is aware where they are. All these touch the lives of our people and all of them reflect serious deficiencies in the decision making processes, judgments as well as performance.

You, as professionals, therefore, are called upon to set high standards and assist in the task of stabilizing society. Your individual and collective contributions will be important. Your leadership will be important. Beyond all, a strong base of morals and values will be important. I am sure that you will have the strength and the capacity to rise to this challenge. But to do all this, you need to continue your pursuit of knowledge. Spending a few years in an university would have provided you with a certain limited degree of knowledge. More importantly, it should have also given you some facility in using knowledge; in training you how to think; how to analyse; and how to reach relevant conclusions and judgments. Hopefully, it should have also given you an insight into how vast the different fields of knowledge are, and how

little one knows in comparison. Knowledge is growing, and growing all the time, indeed growing exponentially. Between your final examination and now, some of the knowledge that you had gained would already have become outdated. Therefore, you have to constantly update your knowledge in a regular and disciplined way. You have to go beyond your subject areas into related areas and even further to unrelated areas of general importance. Otherwise, you will not be able to handle adequately, complexity and ambiguity; the issues that will come up regularly in your working life.

Therefore, please remember that it is recognized universally today, that education and development never stops. Today, the accepted concepts are continuous professional development and life-long learning.

May I now take this opportunity of sincerely congratulating you on your achievements. I wish you every success in all your future endeavors. The country needs strong leadership, based on strong values. I am confident that you are capable of fulfilling these critical needs of your country.

I thank you.

**M. D. D. Pieris**  
**Deputy Chairman**  
**Mercantile Merchant Bank Ltd.**