

# Graduation Address

## Australian Catholic University, 6 May 2025

The Hon. Martin Daubney AM KC, **Chancellor** [Presiding Officer] Professor Chris Lonsdale, **Deputy Provost** [Presenting Officer], colleagues, graduates, ladies and gentlemen,

I thank Australian Catholic University for conferring on me the award of Doctor of the University in recognition of my “contributions to the community and to humanity”. I am deeply grateful for the award and appreciative of the recognition of my contributions.

It is now my privilege to share some insights from the journey which has brought me to this evening, and sharing the stage with the graduates. In seeking to inspire the graduates to make a difference in their communities, I am going to focus my remarks on “contributions to the community”. The University’s students have the opportunity to participate in a community engagement activity. It is a “unique and crucial part” of ACU’s courses that offers a “learning experience” in serving the common good.<sup>1</sup>

In my ACU leadership role, fostering community engagement was part of my portfolio. This was a particular privilege of the role – ACU’s community engagement, which seeks to “build capacity and affirm human dignity” has enabled some amazing “collaborations with communities experiencing disadvantage”.<sup>2</sup>

In 2002 Australia’s nearest neighbour, Timor Leste or East Timor, became the first new nation of the new century. Following its colonisation era under Portugal, Timor Leste had been occupied by Indonesia for some 25 years and decimated by the Indonesians as they were withdrawing prior to independence. Most of the Indonesian-trained teachers had fled the country and there was no teachers college. Australians were called upon to assist the East Timorese to rebuild their country. A founding member of ACU, the Marist Brothers, committed to establishing a teachers college. It was envisaged that this initiative in Baucau, Timor Leste’s second largest city, would build the capacity of both the graduate teachers and their future students.

ACU was invited to work with the Brothers to develop a teacher education program and support its implementation. For almost a decade, I travelled regularly with University colleagues to Baucau. There was still unrest in Timor Leste and the journey across the island was not without its dangers. However, the transformational development of the college’s students and staff as the cohorts of graduates walked across the stage was worth all such challenges.<sup>3</sup> We saw the college emerge as an educational lighthouse and source of hope for the Timorese. Now with some 700 graduates, imagine the ripple effect of this program across Timor Leste.

Around the time the Timor Leste program began, I was asked to meet with the Refugee Tertiary Education Committee, established by an ACU partner, the Jesuits. The group was interested in exploring an initiative to offer tertiary studies to refugees who had fled persecution in Myanmar

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<sup>1</sup> ACU (2025) ‘Student Community Engagement’; <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/community-engagement/student-community-engagement>.

<sup>2</sup> ACU (2025) ‘What is Community Engagement?’; <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/community-engagement/what-is-community-engagement>.

<sup>3</sup> Instituto Católico para Formação de Professores (ICFP) (2025) ‘About ICFP’; <https://www.icfptlmarista.org/copie-de-vision-mission>.

and were living in refugee camps in Thailand. After the meeting, I discussed the request with the then Vice-Chancellor – he said something like: “That sounds pretty chancy but if you think ACU has the capacity to do this, go ahead and explore the possibilities”.

The program was duly approved and for several years the University offered courses in Mae Sot. A study centre was set up near the camps. The refugees came there for their studies and to access computers which were not permitted in the camps. Through a combination of willing and able ACU staff making the arduous trek to Mae Sot and additional online classes, refugee cohorts completed their studies. Significantly, the transcript they received documenting their achievement gave them a formal ‘identity’. They were now in a position to apply for asylum. Many went on to work for their own people in local schools, NGOs and community groups. Other graduates were accepted to study at a Thai or overseas university, including at ACU in Australia.

The program was awarded Best Collaborative International Project in a national competition across all Australian universities in 2008. A consortium of American universities later adapted ACU’s program to offer tertiary studies in refugee camps in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Let me now move to Hong Kong, where for some 20 years ACU worked with Caritas Hong Kong. Caritas was seeking to develop higher education aligned with its motto of directing “special attention ... to the needs ... of the *Last*, the *Least* and the *Lost*”.<sup>5</sup> Initially, ACU staff offered the University’s degree programs in block mode in Hong Kong and mentored Caritas staff to develop local programs. During the partnership, well over 1,000 graduates completed ACU awards.

As ACU’s Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic), I was the sponsor of this program for over a decade. When I retired from ACU, I continued my role with Caritas, including chairing its Institute Development Steering Committee. In January last year, in the challenging political climate of contemporary Hong Kong, the Caritas Institute of Higher Education met the stringent requirements to become Saint Francis University, the first Catholic university in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

Cognisant of the advantages that higher education gives us, I have sought to contribute actively to the various communities in which I have lived and worked. Graduates, I am sure that, as you gain professional experience, you will also receive invitations to engage comparably with your communities. I encourage you to get involved – each such community experience will deepen and widened your expertise, and enrich you personally and enrich those whom you seek to serve.

In conclusion, I offer the graduates my warmest congratulations and good wishes for their personal and professional futures.

Gabrielle McMullen AM

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<sup>4</sup> Duncan MacLaren (2012) ‘Tertiary Education for Refugees: A Case Study from the Thai-Burma Border’, *Refuge*, 27(2), 103-110; ACU (n.d.) ‘From Refugee to PhD’; <https://impact.acu.edu.au/global/from-refugee-to-phd>.

<sup>5</sup> Caritas-Hong Kong (2025) ‘Love in the Service of Hope’; <https://www.caritas.org.hk/en/about/litsoh>.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Francis University (2004) ‘Caritas Institute of Higher Education granted the University Title and Renamed Saint Francis University’; [https://www.sfu.edu.hk/en/media/press-release/index\\_id\\_774.html](https://www.sfu.edu.hk/en/media/press-release/index_id_774.html); (2025) ‘Overview of the University’; <https://sfu.edu.hk/en/about-the-institute/overview-of-the-institute/index.html>.