

People

Then I was off to Hong Kong to start my academic career in a place I had dreamed about going to years earlier



PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES: Former Dareton man Neale O'Connor is a foremost authority on Chinese-Western joint-venture arrangements and the complex issues they present.

Picture: Stacey Merfin

Journey of discovery

From school dropout to celebrated academic, Neale takes account of his life

By John Anderson

It was not a normal route to academia that the boy from Dareton took 32 years ago.

Professor Neale O'Connor dropped out of Mildura Technical School in Year 11 in 1980.

"I didn't have confidence in studying the material for the exams so I took a job as a junior clerical store person at the Mobil petrol depot," Neale said.

"I was there for 18 months until the day I got fired for spilling heating oil on the job.

"I tried to sell insurance and financial services for a couple of years with minimal success.

"One of the directors of the company encouraged me to go and further my studies and I took his advice.

"I enrolled in the two-year Certificate of Business Studies which had just been established at Sunraysia Institute of TAFE.

"I was then able to enter the accounting degree at the then Ballarat College of Advanced Education - now Ballarat University.

"That three years 'dropping out' of secondary school gave me the chance to focus on what I really wanted to do - to study accounting.

"I was always stronger at mathematics than English - I had more

confidence and saw that there was a definite career path that I could study towards.

"I picked up the award for the best student with an accounting and economics major.

"So much for my lack of confidence in studying and passing exams," the professor said.

"In a five-year post-secondary school period, I had sat for over 40 three-hour exams and passed all of them.

"In 1988 I started with a large accountants firm in Melbourne working in the tax accounting section.

"Less than two years later, I found I wanted to do more - an opportunity presented itself to me in the form of a tutor position at the University of Melbourne teaching first and second year accounting.

"These were the scariest days of my life - in two ways - one, it challenged me to overcome my fear of speaking and presenting in public and two, I found I still lacked the confidence to study at a higher level.

"I still had doubts about further study - you don't solve personal problems overnight.

"As part of the tutorship position, I was expected to enrol in post-graduate study in accounting - which

I did for two years in 1989 to 1991. "The next logical step was to study for a research PhD.

"At that time I struggled with a topic and with the research methods class, at the end of which (1991) my professor recommended that I 'stick to teaching' and not pursue a research career - at the same time he notified me that my contract would not be renewed.

"In 1992 I started at the Phillip Institute of Technology (opposite the

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old Pentridge Prison in Coburg).

"At the same time I enrolled in a PhD program at La Trobe University in Melbourne and was determined to succeed at this latest course of action I had taken.

"Finding a topic I felt very passionate about - 'The influence of culture on management practices'.

"Back in 1991, I had the opportunity to travel to China and there realised I wanted to live and work

in the region - either going there as an English teacher or having a PhD and taking the academic track.

"It hardened my resolve to do a PhD and it also helped clarify the topic I wanted to study.

"From 1992 for the next four years, I pulled out all stops to finish my PhD while having a full-time lecturing position at the Phillip Institute - and did so in 1995.

"At the same time I published my first international paper in the Accounting Organisation Society (AOS) - to which my Melbourne University professor said 'well done - you proved me wrong'.

"Then I was off to Hong Kong to start my academic career in a place I had dreamed about going to years earlier.

"Looking back, what made it easy was having that real vision/dream of what I wanted to do after that period of hard work and application.

"In 2011, looking back now, the thing I did was to take 'massive' action - in the sense you go beyond what your mind would normally tell you - enough is enough - in terms of payback for your effort.

"On reflection, having that dream and focus in 1982 (before going back to school) and again in

1991 (starting my PhD) and of equal importance, taking large quantities of action and trading off your expectation for immediate rewards for larger rewards in the future," the professor said.

"I gave up my permanent contract with City University of Hong Kong after 10 years and moved to the University of Hong Kong with the view of wanting to grow further."

During this time Neale has been involved in numerous research projects examining supply chain management, Chinese-Western joint-venture arrangements, the use of management control systems in China-based enterprises, including budgetary control mechanisms and the use of the balanced scoreboard.

Professor O'Connor's book, *Management Control of Multinational Enterprises in China* (McGraw-Hill) remains one of the few published works dealing in detail with the complex issues that arise when Western multi-national corporations enter into joint-venture arrangements with Chinese-based entities.

"I'm moving out of my comfort zone again, but this time on my own volition.

"This time, I'm doing the pushing," the professor from Dareton said.