Australian dentist sets graduation record

LISMORE, Australia: At the age of 97, most people probably consider learning to be the very least of their priorities. Not Dr Allan Stewart from Australia. The former dentist from Fort St Stephens just received his fourth degree – Master of Clinical Science (Complementary Medicine) – surpassing his own world record of being the World's Oldest Graduate set in 2006.

A father of six children and with 12 grandchildren, Stewart gained his first academic title with a Bachelor of Dentistry from the University of Sydney during the 1950s. After completing postgraduate studies in dental surgery in the US, he practised dentistry in Australia and the UK for more than 40 years.

Things took an unusual turn in the late 1980s, when Stewart decided to study law at the University of New England in Armidale at an age when most of his dental colleagues were already enjoying their retirement. Not having completed the programme, he took it up again in 2001 and completed it in only four and a half years, making him then the oldest living person to have ever graduated from university.

According to Stewart, his latest academic endeavour, which ended successfully last Friday with a graduation ceremony in East Lismore near Brisbane, was sparked when one of his daughters began studying arts at Southern Cross University at the age of 70. He enrolled at the same institute in 2009 in spite of his original intention never to go to university again.

“I must say that although it's been a tremendous challenge, I have recently enjoyed it immensely,” Stewart told reporters. “I would strongly encourage any older person to go back to studying.”

University supervisors said that despite his advanced age, he used modern tools of communication, like Skype, during his studies and was actively involved in online discussions and forums.

Besides Stewart, so far only a handful of people worldwide have obtained academic qualifications so very late in life. In 2010, for example, Hazel Soares from the US earned her first college degree from Mills College in Oakland, California, at the age of 94. Three years before, 95-year-old fellow countryman Nola Ochs also graduated with a general studies degree with emphasis in history from Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas.

Stewart, who is said to like boating, fishing and playing bridge in his spare time, announced that he would finally hang up his academic robes after having graduated from Lismore. He remains a member and Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Dental Surgeons.