

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Chair, Jessie Street National Women's Library, Deputy Chair, GROW Council

Delivered at the UTS graduation ceremony
for graduates from the Faculty of Education
Great Hall, City campus, Tuesday 13 May 2008, 10.30am

Pro-Chancellor, Dr Valerie Levy

Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Senior Vice President, Professor Peter Booth

Deputy Vice Chancellor, Anne Dwyer

Acting Dean of Education, Professor Nicky Solomon

Graduands, family and friends, children, ladies and gentlemen

May I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their elders and descendants. May I rejoice in the recent apology (13th February) on behalf of the nation by the Prime Minister and hope in its sounding of a better future for our relationship with Indigenous people.

It is an honour and privilege to give the occasional address at a graduation ceremony at this University at which I had the pleasure of completing a Masters in Adult Education in 1996. I have more recently benefited from professional support from Dr Alex Byrne and the University through my work with the Jessie Street National Women's Library in Ultimo, a library dedicated to the preservation of Australian women's work and words.

Could I congratulate the University on its 20th Anniversary and its high ranking among Australian Universities for excellence in learning and teaching. Could I also pay tribute to the University's extensive commitment to equity and diversity by providing leadership in higher education for a range of social justice initiatives. These are deeply embedded in the institutional culture and reflected in its range of activities, not only for Indigenous Australians, but other groups in our community which need our focused and sensitive support.

Last year I had the pleasure of viewing the exhibition ***Beautiful Minds: Centennial Exhibition of the Nobel Prizes***. I thought it marvelous. Inspiring. Uplifting. Nourishment for the intellect and creativity, motivation for inquiry and curiosity and testament to the accident of great discovery! It was the best use of

the public open spaces which are the first, somewhat intimidating and overwhelming impression of this Tower Building. I would have liked the exhibition to become a permanent fixture, sculpted into the spaces reminding all who entered of the far-reaching purposes of all education. Indeed the experience of the exhibition reminded those who came why education needs to be more than about improving a country's productivity or "releasing the latent value of our human capital" and "turning knowledge into wealth" as enunciated in background papers for the 20/20 Summit.

We are looking forward to world class education being produced through the education revolution.

We have to welcome the links to productivity and the economy if they are to release funds to pay for a truly skilled and talented people, whether working or recreating or connecting through family and in communities. There is a sense of anticipation with the new government's first budget this evening.

The magic will be to create the wealth from sustainable development, to repair and restore our lands, to reconcile our peoples with each other, to redistribute and distribute resources from those who waste too much to those who have very little to waste, so that all people may come to consume wisely and share generously.

The 20/20 Summit unleashed ideas, unearthed some brilliant gems, but our ability as a nation to exploit these will be truly tested by how well we treat each other and our environment by 20/20 and beyond. What will be different in our current lifestyle of consumption without care of its global costs?

Throughout the Summit's Initial Report, education is called upon, like the helpline for the despondent and desperate. This is not a new phenomenon, but a tired and predictable one. Education must ensure the well-being of the young child; it must provide financial literacy for all students by 20/20; mould people to make healthy food choices; provide a 24/7 haven for children and communities; enrich and support arts and creativity; increase foreign language education; teach global literacy and environmental sustainability.

Learning for life accounts for all citizens are recommended as a general goal, and we will need them with that daunting list!

When we venture out with our new qualification, we carry a burden of national responsibility and expectation. Those of us who venture into workplaces to stimulate others to learn, to expand their knowledge and hone or renew old skills, have a nation watching to see whether the investment will pay skills

dividends. Those working in TAFE or other vocational education institutions or schools will be models for others to emulate.

Their colleagues will want to know whether they are more confident and equipped for the digital world, for the continuing technological improvements in the teacher's world to manage and process the vast and infinitely expandable dumps of information that we can capture and store and apply. They will want to know whether the qualification has made a difference to the way we work.

To promote education as the solution, we must become models of its merits. To teach others, we must know ourselves how to be responsive and flexible learners.

Of course, we are discouraged in this time when the country's expenditure on tertiary education has decreased to well below the OECD average. More is wanted and less is given! It is difficult to talk pedagogy or promote the value of an interactive learning environment with a passionate teacher at the helm, when our vocational education institutions are obsessed with "doing business" and entrapped in the language of supplying "flexible response services", whatever they are, to build "the skills base" relating to "economic and enterprise contexts". It is no longer about "running courses" for individuals, but about industries and enterprises. We wonder about functioning and nurturing communities. We wonder perhaps whether we are meant to teach and train people or Aldous Huxley's drones of his *Brave New World*

I flinched as I ploughed through the furrows of dense jargon in the latest rationale for restructuring and repositioning TAFE NSW. I searched in vain for the educational rationale. My skepticism was reinforced, when, under the guise of broadening the pool of industry experts teaching at TAFE, there was another proposal to downgrade teacher qualifications.

There may be a need for change in the expertise of teachers and the mix of qualifications, but why would an educational institution committed to upgrading workers' skills be proposing to downgrade its own workers' skills. How can you advocate what you do not wish to emulate? Of course, I do understand that industry experts have informal as well as formal qualifications, but teaching is a different craft requiring different skills and knowledge. Deeper and different modes of thinking and analysis are required, an understanding of how people learn is still important, not just how they can become competent workers or attain competencies.

Reflecting on that paradox, I rejoiced in the flow of ideas generated for and by the 20/20 Summit. They may power the nation for the next decade. They may

act as lights on a few hills for our leaders to strive towards. Perhaps only one will inspire a potential Nobel Laureate, but that will be more than enough for this small nation. We have, of course, many more Laureates.

I sought refuge again in books and writings as I tried to understand why educational systems have pursued the habits of business and commerce and seemingly lost sight of the value of the discipline which they were established to propagate. I traveled to Canberra to restore myself with the Turner to Monet exhibition in the National Gallery. I looked for the fuel to power a “re-imagining” (with thanks to Griffith Review) of our education system.

To succeed in revolutionizing education, we must have an idea of what it should become. It certainly ought to be life-long. It ought to be a right and not a privilege. It ought to develop our humanity and inculcate social and moral values, such as compassion and generosity. It should be useful in the sense of contributing to our personal development and our ability to function in society and workplaces. It should shape us into productive and engaged citizens. This implies more than skills development and results in much more than productivity.

As you graduate today, reflecting on tomorrow’s world, you become part of an informed and educated society. You will be able to return to it your openness to ideas, your eagerness to expand your knowledge and skills, your desire to embrace new ways of working, to connect to communities. They need you and rely on you to lead, to share and continue to learn.

Congratulations to you all. May you prosper in your work and flourish in friendship and family.