

## OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

### Mr Paolo Totaro, AM

Delivered at the UTS graduation ceremony  
for graduates from the Faculty of Education  
Greenhalgh Theatre, Kuring-gai campus, Tuesday 22 April 2008, 10.30am

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, academic staff, distinguished guests, graduates, families and friends.

I also pay tribute to the original Owners of this Land.

When I was invited by the Vice Chancellor to give this address I was delighted. I work in Vocational Education, have been associated with universities and schools and had so many topics to talk about: vocational subjects in High School, education as a life-long process, the career of teachers, even how inadequate their salaries are for the importance of the job they do. But in the end, I realized there was one aspect of education about which I felt passionately at this time in life. (I also realized I had only 8 minutes to talk, which should come as a relief to you).

The best way I can put my theme is this: that education is the best antidote to indoctrination. Let me start with a personal explanation.

I was born in Italy a long time ago, and was a primary school child under Fascism, the totalitarian regime that would eventually lead Italy into alliance with Hitler and World War II.

Children were indoctrinated into believing that what Mussolini, our dictator, said was absolute truth. Mussolini ha sempre ragione. We were also subjected to other indoctrinations, about the superiority of the so called Aryan race, or the physical punishments of Hell, for instance. It took a terrible war, years of trauma and painful soul searching to counteract those ideas with other, more rational ones about life and its meaning.

Fast forward to 2008 and to another story.

Lorenzo is a 21-year old, Italo-Australian UTS second-year student, now in Shanghai for one year. While preparing for this address, I wrote to him and he replied:

"You want a phrase that captures the essence of my Chinese experience? ... most exciting for me is learning about a different culture, its complexity, contradictions, surprises...The people ...here... have a quiet but strong confidence in themselves and their country... And whilst the communist experiment has caused some terrible losses, it has also dragged China — sometimes kicking and screaming — into modernity...everywhere I look I see problems being fixed, ideas being realized, and hard work being rewarded...the curiosity and tolerance I have met here makes me feel like a welcome — if somewhat strange — guest..."

Lorenzo presence in China, as well as that of so many Chinese students here, implies of course that China, although still a one party regime, is moving beyond the excesses which culminated in the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution. And if many Chinese are able now to link into the world is due also to education. More and more, internationalized education is playing a part in processes of modernization, no less than economic development.

In those same seventies, Australia too, a safe democracy, went through a process of change when the doctrine of the White Australia Policy — which had originated decades earlier to protect white jobs- was made unlawful. White Australia was a doctrine based not on fact but on fear -of competition. Without it, immigration changed, demographics changed and a much more positive perception of Australia's interconnectedness to the world was able to come about.

Incidentally, it was also in the seventies that the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission which I had the honour of chairing for twelve years, presented to Parliament a 600-page report called Participation. It was thirty years ago almost to the day, in May 1978. That report was a blueprint for reforms which the Wran government quickly undertook opening up new opportunities in schools as well as hospitals and courtrooms and in public employment. The school curricula too underwent a process of modernization and opening up.

But of course and most importantly, it was the Australian community as a whole which was re-imagining Australia for this new, interconnected world. So much has changed.

This university, like most others, now depends in significant ways on the economic development of its Asian partners and the continuing inflow of overseas students as well as the overseas placement of Australian graduates.

Australian universities and schools now truly mirror human diversity and are better equipped to educate students for a globalized, peaceful world.

As from today, you are the new educators.

You have been trained to educate by presenting issues in a balanced way, offering best sources as well as the history and philosophy of the disciplines you teach.

In this way, you will open minds to inquiry and to discernment. Your students will be taught to recognize doctrines and theories that do not stand up to reason.

Since the times of Socrates and probably of Confucius, education has meant drawing out not cramming in. Education develops our innate faculties to learn, particularly at the time we are biologically at the most receptive, that is when young.

A note of warning. At the same time that we see rational inquiry entering the education system in so many countries, indoctrination has not at all been eliminated.

Indoctrination means, as you know, cramming in alleged truths without offering reason or alternative. With young people it is tantamount to grave, severe abuse of power. In most countries it does not come through totalitarian dictatorships, but from purveyors of crude and primitive belief systems, often presented in many forms of fundamentalism. We see this happening in widening cultural fringes both in Australia as well as in other countries, especially in the USA, as religious, political or pseudo-scientific fundamentalisms- raise their dangerous heads and make way even inside universities.

Of course, as my friend UTS Adjunct Professor Andy Lloyd-James warned me, we should also beware of people calling “fundamentalist” what are really well-constructed ideas which happen to be different and sometimes antagonistic to our own (e.g. how many appear to imply that Islam is in general fundamentalist).

But I must conclude.

The discipline you have chosen, education, is the best overall antidote to indoctrination. Educators open young minds. Indoctrinators of all kinds close minds, hinder relationships and are a cancer in civil society.

But you know all this and much much more, as graduates from one of the best and most liberal Faculties of Education in Australia.

You know too well for me to stress again the tremendous responsibility you carry as from today.

My best wishes, with a tiny bit of envy at the long and exciting lives you have ahead. May a peaceful world be yours.