

The Qualities of Education

John Ralston

Occasional Address

University of South Australia Graduation Ceremony

March 30, 2012

I wish to acknowledge the Chancellor, Dr Ian Gould AO, Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Hoj, Council Members, Distinguished Guests, Academic colleagues, relatives and friends and, most importantly, the graduates who have received their awards today.

When you come to a Graduation, there are many similarities to a marriage ceremony. For example, you wear nice clothes, although at graduation you also wear academic robes. These robes are very significant because they indicate that you now have a special role in life. In days gone by the robes signified learning, as they do now, but also doubled to keep individuals warm in chilly European university halls and churches. You are “married” to your degree. You cannot be “divorced” and what is more, as distinct from a legal marriage between individuals, you can commit bigamy or trigamy. In other words, you can have several degrees. There are bigamists and even trigamists in today’s ceremony!

I want to consider what it means to have an education. Some say that it is for the moral and mental improvement of the person being educated. It enables

you to function at a high level in society. Your lifework is very important, because your role in society is as a thinker, a problem solver and an educator of other people (you will influence them by what you know). How you articulate your position on society's "great issues" is critical.

As graduates, you are poised at a moment in Australian society that is really quite historic. You have a global role. Some of you are bilingual, a great attribute. Many graduates will commence work in Australia, at the beginning of what is most certainly the Asian century, with population growth and the ensuing demands on energy and resources centred on the Pacific rim. In a similar manner to the great tectonic plates of the Circum Pacific, that belt of geological instability most recently manifested in the Fukushima tsunami, there will be periods of upheaval, instability and huge changes taking place. You are going to be part of this, contributing to the changes and guiding others - including the changes that are taking place right now. Knowledge, wisdom, clarity of thought, the ability to express yourself clearly and the courage to sometimes swim against the tide will be your weapons in the journey ahead. A sense of humour will be of enormous help!

All of you have mobile phones and many have smart phones. Within ten years these will have been superseded completely. Perhaps you will have a chip attached behind your ear which responds to voice commands and does everything that a smart phone does, only ten times more. Personalized medicine, tailored to your genetic code, will become the norm. As the world population inexorably increases, demands for water, energy and food will grow

dramatically. There are both technical, and political aspects to these demands. In various ways each of you will contribute to the solutions that will be necessary. For example, if we are to have appropriate energy sources in the future that will satisfy the demands of increased population, and a vastly increased middle class worldwide, what sort of energy will we use? What will be the role of fossil fuels in fifty years? Will nuclear energy figure in the arguments? Will renewable energy ever play a secure and cost effective role? How will we make sure there are appropriate water allocations in China, Japan and Australia? How will the ecological systems in which we currently operate evolve? Australia will be embedded in a wide range of international political, technical and social initiatives, particularly with Asia. How will you play a role? What skills will you bring to the table?

The Institute which I established was named after a very famous Australian called Sir Ian Wark. He died on 20 April 1985, just before his 86th birthday. He reflected upon the various types of education thus:

“As a schoolboy I had the good fortune to be able to spend many vacations on a farm near Euroa in north-eastern Victoria. Thus I had formal education in Melbourne [Scotch College, University of Melbourne, 1851 Exhibition to UCL London in 1921, PhD in 1923] and informal at Euroa. *I do not know which was the more valuable.* Early contact with the country has given me a great love for it, some slight ability to understand its harshness and its softnesses, and an insight into the character of its people. The point I am striving to emphasise, and it cannot be over-emphasised, is that one’s formal attendance in the lecture hall is only a part of education and perhaps not the most important part at all”.

Sir Ian went on to say “Any country as well endowed as Australia must back the absolutely first-rate man or woman in whatever he or she wants to do, be it writing poetry, composing music, seeking the cause of disease, or finding out what the atoms are made of. Sir Robert Menzies has repeatedly stressed the need for unrestricted backing of quality – quality of mind in particular. Do we support quality sufficiently when it is present? Are we prepared to have our taxes raised to encourage it?”

These remarks were made during the Sir John Morris Memorial Lecture delivered by Sir Ian in Tasmania in 1967, 50 years ago. They resonate even more today.

I wish to also quote the writer Thomas Friedman, who recently commented on education. Friedman maintains that the only way we can really shape the future is by “giving more people the knowledge and skills to compete, collaborate and connect in a way that drives our countries forward”.

I have great pride in you, and the University from which you are graduating. You are special people. You must have the courage and willingness to break through in whatever areas you choose to work. Look beyond the borders of your city, your state, your country. You really are citizens of the world and must take part in, guide and contribute to the great changes that will occur in your working lifetime. The years ahead are full of excitement, so be bold.

Please accept my sincere congratulations and very best wishes for the future.