

Uni South Australia graduation

Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, distinguished staff of the Uni of SA, graduands, ladies and gentlemen,

It is not often that one can begin a speech with the inspirational words

Today is a day you will all always remember.

Well it is, for all of you and for me, a day we will always remember and remember with pride and happiness.

All of you graduating here have reached an important milestone in your lives.

And I have just had a great honour bestowed on me by your university.

Thank you.

Nothing could mean more to me than this honour.

For someone, who believes as I do, that universities, along with our parliaments and our system of law are the crucial institutions of our democracy, to receive such recognition is of the greatest personal importance.

It is wonderful to be part of this graduation ceremony.

To take part with so many successful students, graduating in such a variety of disciplines boosts my belief in Australia, in what we can offer to our own citizens and to the rest of the world.

The role of universities in that world has changed dramatically and grown enormously in my lifetime.

As new graduates you are part of a generation where close to half your peers will have the chance to get a higher education qualification.

You have taken your degrees at the Uni of Sa, a remarkable institution, respected world wide for its research and teaching and just as importantly for the equity and access it has provided to students from minority groups, especially its outstanding work in indigenous education.

This university is part of an excellent and varied university sector in the progressive and dynamic state of SA.

No wonder the state is thriving when it can build its economy and civil society on such a strong university base.

Some years ago now this State, like others in Australia was experiencing economic recession. Economists gloomily forecast that SA was finished, that the old economy of manufacturing had been destroyed by globalisation, and there was nothing to replace it.

I used to argue with them at that time; *look at the South Australian universities*. I would point out that in them you have the building blocks for the state's future prosperity.

And so they have been, and you are all part of that prosperity.

I might take this opportunity to reflect how far the Australian university sector has come in my lifetime.

The range and quality of our Australian universities today could only have been dreamed of half a century ago when your VC Denise Bradley and I were students together at a small parish school in Maroubra NSW. In those days about 5 % of students on finishing school went to university. Most of them were well off, and of course most of them were male.

Girls like Denise Bradley and Susan Ryan were supposed to head for low level clerical or factory jobs, which of course you would be sacked from upon marriage.

The really talented and ambitious girls might get into teaching or nursing, but even then only as a stop gap before marriage and children.

All the professions, the senior roles in business and government, research and teaching positions in universities, let alone vice chancellorships, all of these were virtually closed to women.

For young men, universities were for only for the rich or those exceptionally talented boys who were lucky enough to find some scholarship support.

One of the enduring satisfactions of living in the 21st century, troubled as it is in so many other ways, is to see how women are now contributing to our society, across all sectors, at the highest level ,and with success.

No one personifies this massive change better than your Vice Chancellor Professor Denise Bradley. There are now, I am happy to say, a number of female VC's. But... none as distinguished, none with such a long track record of achievement for her institution as Denise Bradley

And no university in Australia more than the Uni SA demonstrates how a well governed university, with great leadership, ambitious policies, dedicated staff and motivated students can offer such an array of excellent courses to such an impressive range of students.

It is thus a great thrill for me personally to be honoured today by one of Australia's finest academic leaders, and the South Australian of the Year.

This is your day and I would like you to consider how you will look back on this day when you are in your sixties, and how you will judge what your degree has enabled you to achieve.

I expect you all have great plans for your careers. Because this is the 21st century you will move through many different jobs, maybe teaching, research, the media in its many forms, the arts, maybe business or government, here in Adelaide, elsewhere in Australia and for most of you, some time at least overseas, working in other countries, other societies.

As you change jobs and directions you will continually learn and expand your skills and ideas.

But what you have achieved today will provide the foundation for all of that.

Your degree is also the foundation for your life as a citizen, here in Australia or in other countries.

Because you have the great benefit of education, you will be able to play a part in the community; in making it better, fairer, more tolerant of diversity, more compassionate.

I hope that all of you, whether you work in education, the media or the arts, will also be activists in relation to those important aspects of our democratic society: fairness, tolerance, and compassion.

Just this week we have seen great courage and leadership in our federal parliament. Some members of the governing parties have, at huge cost to themselves, maybe the cost of losing their political careers, decided to act on principles of humanity and compassion.

They have blocked government legislation which was designed to condemn desperate asylum seekers to a jail in Nauru, where they would be outside the protections of our democracy, and at risk of constant violation of their human rights.

It appears now that because of the bravery of a few MPs and Senators, this terrible plan has been abandoned.

These brave people however need the support of all of us, via letters, emails, personal congratulations, letters to newspapers and magazines, in print and online. You can use, on this occasion and the many others that will arise in future, the knowledge, the skills and the confidence your education at Uni SA has given you. You can protect and advance our democratic values, as well as advancing your brilliant careers.

If you can do both of those things well: work and community involvement, you will indeed look back on this day as one of the happiest and most important of your lives.

I wish you all well and conclude by repeating my heartfelt thanks for the great honour you have given me.