

Occasional Address delivered at the University of South Australia Graduation Ceremony on Thursday March 29th
Amy King

Deputy Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, fellow graduands.

In 1987, at the age of 5, I entered the public primary school not far from my home. This school, Noarlunga Downs Primary, had been built only 4 years earlier and was surrounded by newly constructed public housing.

I remember a lot of things about this school. I remember teachers who spent the first 20 minutes of a 30 minute lesson screaming at kids to be quiet. I remember being thrilled when, 2 years after the school opened, we finally had tables and chairs in the classroom. And I remember the police turning up to the school on a number of occasions to return or collect kids who had been caught running off the school grounds at recess to throw rocks through the brand new windows of the surrounding houses. As a relatively shy child I can still remember feeling nervous a lot of the time.

In 1991, I started at a 75 year old private school that seemed, for an 8 year old, a very long way from home. On my first day I remember watching 20 girls in floral pinafores running delicately around—never trampling over—the school’s rose garden. I distinctly remember feeling that I could, all of a sudden, relax in my new surroundings.

I spent the next 8 years at this school and received an amazing education, only occasionally being reminded that I was a long way from home. Every year my school held a day known as ‘Because we have enough day’. All the girls and teachers were asked to bring cans of food from home to donate to families less fortunate than themselves. Every year, without fail, I remember the school chaplain thanking us on behalf of Anglicare who would come to collect our cans and distribute them amongst the less fortunate families....in Noarlunga.

I do not tell you these stories in a bid for pity, because my upbringing was far from disadvantaged. Thanks to parents who instilled in me a love of learning, and a scholarship to a private school, I received the benefit of an excellent education in idyllic surroundings in Adelaide. I tell you this story simply to highlight a small part of the disparity faced by students at schools around our country.

When I received the Rhodes scholarship last year, *The Advertiser* journalist and my local MP were both incredibly pleased to report that I was the product of a public school located in one of Adelaide’s poorer suburbs. As someone who believes firmly in public education and the importance of public education to successful societies, I’ve spent the last few months thinking, ‘If only that were true’.

For although I spent the first four years of my schooling in the public system, the reality is that it was my public school teachers who advised my parents to send me to a private school. My teachers knew all too well that schools such as Noarlunga Downs didn’t have the resources to deal with students’ behavioural problems, let

alone the time, money and patience to motivate and challenge students who wanted to learn.

Although these teachers were correct, they probably never realised how dire the situation really was. We know now that students from Adelaide's lowest socio-economic backgrounds—those from schools in the northern and southern suburbs of Adelaide—have a far lower likelihood of completing Year 12 than students from Adelaide's richest suburbs and schools.

We know now that even if these students do complete Year 12, their SACE scores will be among the lowest in South Australia.

And we know now that because of this, students from Adelaide's poorest suburbs and schools are up to 7 times less likely to go to University than those from Adelaide's richest.

The disparity facing children and young people at schools around this state and country is overwhelming. While Australian society will always be divided in some way between those who have and those who don't, we know that completing Year 12 and participating in further education or training is the single most important factor in determining an individual's future income and job opportunities or, as some might say, future success.

Although it should not be true of an egalitarian society such as Australia's, it is still far too easy to predict the outcomes of young people in this country because of where they live and go to school.

Yet today we graduate from an institution that believes we can challenge this prediction. Many of you may not realise that the University of South Australia was established, in part, to provide higher education to Indigenous Australians and to those who have suffered educational or social disadvantage.

Through partnerships with the State's most disadvantaged schools, and special access entry schemes for students with disabilities, Aboriginal students and adult learners, the University we graduate from today has opened the doors of higher education to many who might never have entered. Over the past three years I have had the opportunity to work with some of these students. Most were among only a handful in their high schools to complete Year 12, and virtually all were the first in their families to study at university.

Today we graduate from an institution whose mandate is to uphold values larger and more important than those of individual success. This is something we should be proud of.

But this is also something which gives us, individually, a great responsibility. We have received an education that many in our own state, country and around the world, will not. Today we must decide how these past years as students—and soon to be graduates—of the University of South Australia, will go on to influence the choices in our lives.

My hope for all of us is that, as journalists, social workers, diplomats, and in every other field, we meet the challenge to look beyond ourselves and our own ambitions, and work to contribute something to the communities around us. Our education at this Institution has afforded us great opportunity, but also great responsibility. I hope that every one of us will aim to do good, and not just to do well.

In my own life, I hope that further research will allow me to contribute to resolving some of the major tensions on Australia's borders. The political and security challenges of Northeast Asia fascinate me not only from a research perspective, but also from an ethical one.

The often tense relationships between China, Japan, Taiwan and the Korean peninsula pose great theoretical challenges for researchers in this field. Yet policy decisions over defence budgets, energy resources and trade relations have the potential to pose even greater real-world danger to the citizens, governments and economies of this region and the world. It is not enough to theorize; we must also act.

As an Australian, I believe our country is uniquely placed between Asia and the West. Over the last two decades we have seen our economy thrive as a result of trade with East Asia, and the growth of China is now funding Australia's 'resource boom'. Yet while the miracle of our geographic location gives economic fortune to Australia, it also gives us the burden of responsibility to assist in resolving, not simply exploiting, the political, security, economic and environmental challenges in this region.

Through the work of each us of here today, fortunate to be the recipients of a tertiary education, I believe that Australia can and will rise to meet its responsibilities in the world.

Whatever future you embark on after leaving the University of South Australia, I hope you will join in me in pledging to do good, not merely to do well.

Good luck and congratulations on your graduation.

Thank you.