

Teaching: A profession for the 21st Century

*An address to the University of South Australia Graduation Ceremony at the
conferring of awards by the School of Education*

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3 April 2009**

**Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Professors Emeriti Ebbeck and Reid,
Professor Marie Brennan, Staff, Graduands, Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. From the welcome I seem to have returned to my old stamping ground and feel very much at home. I wear with pride the Doctor of the University academic dress presented to me on this stage a year or two ago. My father attended Adelaide Teachers College in the early 1930's. I did in the 50's, two of my daughters are graduates of earlier institutions, and I headed one or other of the four overarching precursor colleges between 1972 and 1984 that joined with SAIT in 1987 to become this now great university. The story of UniSA and its antecedents is fully integrated with the history of education in South Australia from its earliest beginnings and we should all cherish it.

Today represents both ends and beginnings: ends with the tribute paid to the educational contributions of EP Marjory Ebbeck and EP Alan Reid over their long professional lives, both of whom I had the privilege of knowing well. Marjorie's contribution to early childhood education and Alan's to curriculum among many other things show how South Australia can lead the way in matters educational. If I add the contribution of the Dean, Marie Brennan I guess between us we share something like 200 years of work in the teaching profession. That is quite a big end!

From ends, now to beginnings: I welcome to the profession all of you who are graduating today. I wonder from your group of graduands who will become professors, let alone professors emeriti if not in this University, then elsewhere. I wonder as specialists in teaching and learning what original contributions you will make to the shared body of knowledge that makes teaching a profession. What responsibility will you take for the conserving and renewing of knowledge and skill so critical for the development of a true profession?

I wonder where 50 years from now the profession of teaching will sit in the offerings of this university. Let me say I am not optimistic at least within the generality of university offerings across Australia that preparing teachers will continue as a university program. TAFE stands waiting; employers want to dabble; costs will be

cut. There are many, too, in universities who would be happy to see the back of this moaning, groaning, never satisfied far too public field of study.

The coming depression will no doubt encourage people to think of teaching as a worthwhile career something that occurred with the last depression of the 1920/30s when my father entered teaching after the farm went broke. In the 50s he advised me that teaching 'was a good secure profession'. Pay dad I said Pay, but he managed to convince me or at least a teaching scholarship and free fees to the university did and I have never regretted it. I am sure you will not either. There is nothing more rewarding for people who like people, than playing a part in the physical, social, intellectual and emotional development of children.

In my view universities will only retain responsibility for the preparation of people for the teaching profession if they see the serving of teaching as high (and some would say higher) a priority by all faculties as serving other professional areas. If some form of your discipline is taught in schools then your discipline in the University must lead its professional expression by teachers in schools and be involved in the activities of related professional teaching associations.

To turn briefly to a medical comparison: there are many centres for important medical research in universities. To my knowledge we have no centres where research into pedagogy and the science of teaching at all levels is the main aim. How can this be? Universities must provide leadership in teaching and in developing the profession of teaching. Sadly they do to a very limited extent, and in Australia the press seems by default to be taking a leadership role in education and pushing us backwards rather than supporting bold moves forward, for example as given in the new SACE to be taught in South Australia and in which Alan Reid played such an important role.

From the status teaching and education seem to be given in too many of our universities, it is hard to believe that providing international education is Australia's third largest export earner. It won't be for long unless we are much more proactive about what we have to offer. The last major efficiency/effectiveness decision in schools I think was the use of school buses and the closing of hundreds of one teacher schools. What about the electronic whiteboard or the large multi school I hear you

say: well the jury is still out on those! Think about the research we see into wheat or wine, which are now well down the export earner list. Schooling is one of the few areas of human endeavour where efficiency has decreased with very little tangible evidence of improvements in effectiveness. In fact the one area of public research debate seems to be the teaching of reading because there isn't much else, and even with this a state Minister sees fit to set up her own piece of research.

Which leads me to the three lacks we have in education in Australia and where I hope soon some universities will do something about it :

- Too few if any educational philosophers to lead us forward: I once asked Peter Singer the Australian philosopher whether he has ever thought of giving up on animals and death and giving children and life a go.
- Not enough educational economists who know schooling, rather than economists who know economics
- Not enough senior people in Universities interested in and prepared to drive a schooling agenda in the way Fred Schonell of UQ with disabilities education, Don Stranks of UofA with science education, and Peter Karmel of ANU with educational research and the economics of education.

Each of these has been wisely chosen by me because they are dead, but they have left a remarkable legacy that needs to be restarted by our universities. I refer particularly to Peter Karmel, who had the insight so important in the decade ahead if recovery from the depression is to be swift, that 'education plays a critical role in the conversion of resources into production', which he expressed more forcefully as 'Truly, the most distinctive feature of our economic system is the growth in human capital'. Just think of the human capital wasted over the past decade on toxic loans, banking, flash ways to make money all encompassed by that fashionable word 'greed'. Can you as new teachers be part of any more honourable an enterprise than building the nation's human capital?

South Australian teachers in my experience have always brought to their teaching high levels of professional knowledge, expertise, and ethical commitment and it is against these three you will be judged by your peers, your students, and their families. Above all, these are the three against which you should judge yourself and the

profession is currently looking at the standards that should be applied to judge quality teaching.

When I was locked into school teaching issues and particularly curriculum and pedagogy in the 60s and 70s we used to say that you went to NSW to see how things used to be, to Victoria to see how teachers wanted them to be, but it was in South Australia that you found out how things needed to be if your main focus was on children learning. Tremendous leadership and pedagogical innovation has come from South Australia often not to cross the State's borders.

To draw this ramble together to end with a forward looking theme, I want to focus on three centuries: backwards to the 19th and 20th and forward to the 21st.

We can refer to the 19th Century as one of democratic and educational ideas. Not just the philosophers, such as Rousseau, Matthew Arnold, Pestalozzi, Montessori, or John Stuart Mill, but more importantly those who debated through the parliaments of this country the issue of free, public, compulsory, and secular education for all, ending the century with a single nation we lovingly call Australia.

These radical ideas were articulated for the first time in Australia in 1840s. The ideal was for the inhabitants to be bound together by a citizenry that had acquired at least the core rudiments of literacy and numeracy. Yet it was not until 1875 that legislation guaranteeing an education system based on these passed the SA Parliament under the strong guidance of one of W K Bunday, the Minister for Justice and Education. (My goodness, a single Minister for lawyers and teachers! No wonder he had a struggle getting the legislation through!))

This legislation, so boldly stating the kind of (South) Australia that our political thinkers of the time wished to establish, symbolically captured the enduring interconnectedness of classroom, school and nation. The establishment of the public system of education was the country's great achievement of the 19th Century.

The 20th Century. The previous century was largely put to operationalising these great ideas, and to build the large number of schools required to provide education for

everybody. For those of us who grew up with public education for all firmly in place can barely imagine what our country was like before. Nor can we imagine the pressures on state finances, and the difficulties just to find enough teachers and build enough buildings the implementing of such a policy required. Colin Thiele's *Grains of Mustard Seed* describes these times well and I suggest all teachers read it in their first year or two of teaching if not before. The Chapter on The Great Depression is particularly instructive in these depressed economic times.

We have behind us a great national endeavor, arising from the ground-breaking philosophical ideas of the 19th Century, and implemented in the 20th. Although huge bureaucracies were not necessarily a consequence of free, secular, and compulsory education, this is the way all the states went. We should realize, however, that bureaucracies are not so much about providing quality education, as ensuring that there are enough schools and teachers. Such systems were driven by providing inputs, rather than guaranteeing outputs. Larded onto these Herculean efforts by the states was the entry of the Commonwealth into funding non government schooling. This outcome is a matter for discussion at another time, but it has fundamentally changed the amorphous mass that is schooling to be shaped into something different in the 21st Century.

For example, what might the concepts of free, compulsory, and secular mean in the 21st Century and will they are still relevant? The issue of 'free' for the bulk of the population has not been strictly true for some time. Can it continue to be?

The issue of 'compulsory' is also being addressed. No longer will it be an input requirement. We already have a society where it is 'natural' to stay at school until the age of 15 or 16, whichever is the particular school leaving age. The 'compulsion' issue will be turned into an output requirement: what should every young citizen know or be able to do before pursuing learning that in the end will lead to some form of future employment. Minimum standards or requirements in things like numeracy, literacy, technacy, social understanding and the like will be expected, and the right to move on to further learning or work will be closely monitored.

The issue of 'secular' too will be given new dimensions. Public education will be expected to make clear the values of the school and be genuinely places where bridging takes place. Increasingly, non-secular schools will share facilities with public schools so that opportunities for both bonding and bridging can occur.

All of this will drive public schools out of being part of a bureaucracy and towards being directly responsive to local and regional needs. Bureaucracies will be retained to do what they do best: allocate resources, set standards, monitor outcomes, and as a point of last resort, settle disputes and disagreements. They find it extremely difficult to deliver what increasingly parents are demanding: quality. They are good at stretching thin resources, so that inputs are allocated fairly with state wide class sizes and standard designs, but this all ensures uniform mediocrity rather than uniformly high levels of performance. Schools are 'good enough' rather than as good as they can be.

The dilemma for the 21st Century is the issue of free vs. quality education. Guarantees of free education were never able to guarantee quality education. Under this rubric you might receive quality schooling, or you might not. It was the luck of the draw, and I was lucky. Free education did mean that you had a teacher, and something that could be called a school. At the beginning of the last century this was a tremendous advance. At the beginning of this one, parents see it as being nowhere near enough. At the moment in their search they are beginning to say that they might have to pay extra for it. And governments are saying we will help you with funds to find it. Governments will want to support parents who are prepared to contribute to the education of their own children, but as yet mainly through the non-public system.

The challenge for this century is to assist all parents who want to contribute to the education of their own children through schooling, irrespective of whether the school is part of the public system or not, are able to do so, while those who are not able to contribute because of life circumstance are still able to give their children a quality education. The emphasis of the 20th Century was on providing free public education. The emphasis for this century must be on providing quality education for all throughout their whole time at school.

To conclude: what will this century bring for teachers? Change happens much more quickly now. We will not have a century to put our ideas straight and another to implement them. Everything will happen at once with a range of ideas being tried to examine their effectiveness. We see some of this now, with new ideas for schools and their organization being tried across the country. Teachers are by nature conservative, and these changes will challenge their skills and flexibility.

I hope that fundamental to teaching will be a quest for genuine quality. Schools trying to become as good as they can be rather than good enough.

A genuine profession by teachers for teachers so that teachers themselves can pursue what quality teaching means. A raising in universities of the priority they give to preparing people for the profession of teaching. A commitment by employers of teachers to ongoing development of staff. A focus on pedagogy as well as curriculum. We want parents to be proud of their schools and their teachers.

Let us make this 21st Century the one where we gave quality in teaching our absolute and highest priority. Let us create new moulds; new mechanisms for funding that encourage quality, and particularly, a new professionalism, which will allow teaching to lead this century's knowledge revolution. And you at the beginning of your careers will have the challenge and responsibility to bring it about. Good luck as you 'give it a good old Australian GO'! Thank You.