

Citation for Nelson Meers AO
Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*)

Friday, 14 May 2021 – 4.00pm

I am delighted to present today Mr Nelson Meers AO for admission to an Honorary Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) in recognition of his outstanding contribution to civil service and the arts. His outstanding work has influenced the thinking and general well-being of the wider community for decades.

Nelson holds a law degree from the University of Sydney and was a practicing solicitor until the mid-1970s.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Nelson demonstrated exceptional commitment to civil service in Government. He was elected as Alderman for the City of Sydney and held this office for six years during which time he was noted for his advocacy for residential regeneration within the Sydney CBD and the restoration of the Queen Victoria Building. Nelson became Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney City in 1978 and then was elected as Lord Mayor of Sydney from 1978 to 1980.

In June 2005, he was awarded an Order of Australia for his service to the preservation of Australian cultural life through his support of arts organisations.

In 2001, Nelson established the Nelson Meers Foundation, alongside his daughter Samantha Meers to realise his dream of philanthropically supporting the interests and welfare of organisations that produce innovative and engaging cultural programs, and those that utilise creative expression to promote individual wellbeing or to create positive social change. The Foundation's 'theory of change' is social cohesion through connection to culture.

Over the last 20 years through the Foundation, Nelson has funded over 100 innovative and diverse projects working with more than 70 different organisations across Australia, using the arts to cultivate greater tolerance, enlightenment, diversity, and social cohesion. Further, the Foundation prioritises projects and programs that build the long-term capacity of the organisation concerned to bring about a lasting impact upon the wider community. The Foundation's philanthropy spans the spectrum of the visual, literary and performing arts and it has funded not just major cultural organisations, but includes medical organisations, indigenous organisations, educational institutions, social reform organisations and documentary filmmakers. In 2005, only 4 years after its establishment, the Nelson Meers Foundation won the Goldman Sachs JB Were Artsupport Australia Philanthropy Leadership Award.

The Nelson Meers Foundation is one of the University's most significant arts patrons. Their donation towards the new Chau Chak Wing Museum recognised the opportunity to enhance the University's reputation as a creative hub and a visual symbol of its diverse contributions to Australia's cultural heritage as well as the need for the museums' collections need to become more accessible.

Nelson has said "Without the arts, the disadvantaged in our community are further impoverished". The Foundation also supports the University's Widening Participation in English Program, a program which engages students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds with the arts. Academics from the University visit disadvantaged schools in Western Sydney and regional and rural NSW with two goals in mind—to bring literature and the humanities to life and to open up low-socioeconomic students to the possibilities of tertiary study. This aim of the Foundation mirrors one also fundamental to the University—to promote social inclusivity and in doing so, encourage students who are the first in their families to study at University. The Foundation has, in the past, also supported programs at the University through the Power Institute and the Brain & Mind Research Institute.

Nelson strongly advocates for conspicuous philanthropy, believing that anonymous giving does little to encourage others and implies a passive role in the giving process. To this end, the Nelson Meers Foundation strives for a positive, interactive relationship with the organisation it supports, often speaking publicly about philanthropy and funding programs to promote a better understanding of benefits of active giving. Through these means, Nelson has been instrumental in influencing the thinking and general wellbeing of the community.

Nelson has shown a committed dedication, through decades of civil service and philanthropic giving, to inclusion, cultural tolerance, and individual wellbeing. This commitment will be survived through the Nelson Meers Foundation, ensuring a continued and profound impact upon the arts community.

I present Mr Nelson Meers AO to receive an Honorary Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) and confer the degree upon him.