

Citation for Chris Vonwiller
Doctor of Engineering (*honoris causa*)

Thursday, 27 May 2021 – 4.30pm

Chancellor, it gives me great pleasure to present Chris Vonwiller to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Engineering (*honoris causa*) in recognition of his exceptional achievements as a pioneer of machine learning and data aggregation which have revolutionised technological frameworks across the globe.

Chris graduated from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Science in 1963 and a Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) in 1965, and later completed a Master of Business Administration at Macquarie University. Chris has held senior executive positions at Telstra and was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering in 2007. Chris is the non-Executive Chairman of Appen, a technology company that he co-founded with his wife, Dr Julia Vonwiller.

In 1999 Chris left his senior position at Telstra to join the rapidly expanding Appen, taking up the role of CEO. With passions for both engineering and business Chris soon turned his innate curiosity and problem-solving abilities toward helping to create the success that Appen enjoys today. Under the joint leadership of Julia and Chris, Appen has transformed from a small start-up in Sydney's North Shore into a global company at the centre of one of the world's most exciting industries – Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning.

The Vonwillers have demonstrated a commitment to ethical business practices and have applied this ethic through their leadership. Chris has led the growing global company Appen adhering to environmental, social and governance priorities that encourage diversity, fair corporate administration and communal wellness in the workplace, positioning Appen at the forefront of ethical management in large business. In 2019, Appen was formally recognised by the Philippine Council of Organisations on Disability and Empowerment for practicing and promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Chris is a passionate leader in the work of the Foundation that he and Julia established together in 2009. The Foundation provides generous grants in science, technology, health and medical research and education. Universities, hospitals and organisations like the Taronga Zoo and Heart Research at the Kolling Institute have all benefitted. The Foundation has recently established an Indigenous scholarship through the University of Newcastle to help support educational outcomes and employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is only one of many examples of the role that the Vonwillers have played in providing life-changing opportunities for so many people.

Chris has been a patron of the University of Sydney for many years. Through a series of large gifts to the University, the Vonwiller Foundation has helped to support our STEM Teacher Enrichment Academy by funding the position of a post-doctoral research fellow to join the team. This education-based initiative was designed to promote science, technology, engineering and mathematics by developing the capacity of teachers to collaboratively design integrated STEM curriculum for school students.

Chris was on the Board of the University's Warren Centre for Advanced Engineering from 2001 to 2014 including Chairman from 2011 to 2014. He continues this close association with the University through donations and lectures. Chris was listed multiple times as one of "Top 100 Australia's Most Influential Engineers", and in 2010 he was named as "Entrepreneur of the Year" by Engineers Australia Sydney Division.

Chris maintains his role as the Chairman of the Board at Appen and continues to contribute to innovation in business by mentoring in fields such as robotics, agriculture, construction and communications.

Chris is very conscious of the imperatives of innovation and the need to be agile, and once quipped that the fast-moving technology industry is like riding a tiger- I quote: "if you fall off, you'll get eaten, so you hold on for dear life!". Thankfully Chris did hold on for dear life and went on to embrace his passions for new ideas, initiating change and inspirational corporate leadership.

In partnership with his wife Julia, Chris has made a tremendous contribution to society not only as an employer but also as a provider of generous grants and scholarships.

Chancellor, I present Chris Vonwiller for admission to the degree of Doctor of Engineering (*honoris causa*) and invite you to confer the degree upon him.