

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

Thursday, 27 May 2021 – 4.30pm

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

Education and scholarship played a formative role in the life of Julia Vonwiller. Julia is a respected linguist who studied at Macquarie University and graduated in 1980 with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours). Julia then completed her PhD in linguistics at Macquarie in 1989 before working as a researcher at the University of Sydney.

In 1996, Julia left her position at the University of Sydney to launch an IT firm out of the spare room of her house on Sydney's North Shore with the help of her husband, Mr Chris Vonwiller.

With Julia's skills and passions in language and Chris' engineering and business acumen, together they created Appen, arguably one of the greatest IT success stories in Australia. Julia applied her linguistics skills to revolutionize the manner in which data is collected across multiple language settings to enable greater quality in voice recognition technologies. Unlike many competitors, Julia found a way to work with Asian languages, which required some sophistication and the use of computer-literate native speakers to work on computer processing. Appen's reach is significant, using a global team of over 1 million skilled contractors who speak over 235 languages and dialects across 170 countries.

Appen was founded long before artificial intelligence became fashionable and is a testament to the foresight of the Vonwillers. Appen's objective is to use data in the form of text, speech, audio and video to build and improve the world's most advanced artificial intelligence systems. The company's innovative approach to business operations has made Appen a client of many of the world's largest tech entities, including the US Silicon Valley giants. Appen's customers use machine learning for a variety of uses such as automatic speech recognition and improving customer service capabilities with tools like chatbots and virtual assistants.

Only 24 years later, Julia and Chris are recognised among Australia's most successful business people. As savvy entrepreneurs and avid philanthropists, the Vonwillers have helped place Australia on the map for technological innovation and have supported the next generation of Australian minds through their generous financial support and active engagement in programs of higher education.

While corporate growth often comes at the cost of social responsibility, Julia and Chris have made it a mission of Appen to demonstrate a commitment to positive societal change and progress. Appen prides itself in celebrating diversity and is a strong supporter of the working from the home model to help support those who otherwise find it difficult, including those with a disability. The welfare of people is at the forefront of the mission of Appen and is testament to the core values which motivate the Vonwillers' energies and enterprise.

Julia and Chris' dedication to the betterment of society is not confined to their business operations at Appen; they have also exhibited a firm belief in the transformative power of philanthropy. In 2009, Julia and Chris started the Vonwiller Foundation. Through this charity, they have made generous donations in the areas of healthcare, education, science and technology, and have improved the lives of many students through scholarships and education initiatives.

Julia has been an active 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.

Beyond the financial commitment to this cause, Julia has also offered her valuable expertise and guidance. Among other notable figureheads of the Australian STEM sector, Julia currently sits on the advisory boards of the STEM Academy, the Humanitarian Innovation Awards (The Warren Centre) and the Advisory Board of the Macquarie University Centre for Reading.

Julia is an active member of the University of Sydney community and generously donates her time, energies and expertise. Julia is a leading innovator in the technology sector across the globe and along with her adherence to ethical business practice and generous support of our community, she continues to produce the sort of positive societal change that is worthy of recognition.

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