

Occasional Address by the Hon. Julia Gillard AC

University of Sydney, Wednesday Oct 15

Thank you, Professor Adkins for reading that very generous citation earlier, and to Professor Scott and the University Council for agreeing to confer this Honorary Doctorate of Letters.

I am truly grateful.

My deepest congratulations go to everyone who has graduated today.

I feel honoured to share this occasion with you and to be recognised by Australia's oldest university, an academic community which has always aspired to pursue – as your motto says - the same learning under new stars. To bring the best of the academic traditions of age-old institutions like Oxford and Cambridge but mould them for a different nation under the Southern Cross.

Under new stars – I think there is magic in that phrase. And I am just so conscious of how my life has been shaped by my parents' decision to migrate to Australia and to give me the opportunity to learn under new stars.

From a very young age, my parents instilled in me that education was not just the key to a good job, but the foundation stone of a good life.

I had the privilege of attending quality public schools, which set me up for university, put me on the path to law and, eventually, serving in our nation's parliament.

Education was the foundation upon which I built the kind of life I wanted to lead. One in which I could make a real difference to the lives of others through a meaningful contribution to society.

As Minister for Education, and then Prime Minister, my understanding of the transformative power of education led me to focus on reforms that would increase access to quality education for everyone.

Since leaving Federal Parliament, I have continued to see education change lives, in my role as Patron of CAMFED – the Campaign for Female Education – and formerly as Chair of the Global Partnership for Education.

I have witnessed how the prospects of children, especially the most disadvantaged girls and young women, can skyrocket, when they are given the opportunity to go to school and higher education.

Opportunities that have the ability to not just transform one life but the potential to change entire communities.

And I have become intrigued by the history of education in Australia.

In 2016 I was delighted to attend the 200th anniversary of Newcastle East Primary School, Australia's oldest continuous school. It was established in 1816 and was attended by 16 students. The teacher was a convict released on licence. The authorities figured given he was incarcerated for being a forger, he must know how to write.

I'm not aware of criminality being a characteristic of the founders of this university in 1850, but the Vice Chancellor may want to correct me.

What stands out here is that a founding principle of this university was admission being based solely on academic merit, regardless of religious belief or social status. This was a very progressive stance for the era.

Then, in a further reforming move, the decision to admit women was made in 1881. To help you measure the power of this achievement, let me share with you that earlier this year, I went to Pembroke College Cambridge to help celebrate the fortieth anniversary of their decision to admit women in 1985.

By the time Pembroke made the decision to act, this University had been graduating women students for 100 years.

In Pembroke's defence, I should note it wasn't the last College to move on. There was an all-male college at Cambridge until 1988.

I hope you feel a sense of pride to graduate from a university with such a storied history.

But as new graduates, after today's celebrations, you will be thinking about the future, and so you should.

In that future, the stars will still be with us, as will the power of learning.

What I want us to take into that future is the kind of values baked into this university at its inception.

There are many challenges we face today - rising nationalism and geopolitical tensions, war, worsening climate change, the opportunities and risks of artificial intelligence – to name just a few. But I particularly want to draw your attention to three challenges that are antithetical to the values of this university – the rise of a privileged and powerful uber-rich, the embrace in the United States and many other parts of the world of a

more authoritarian form of politics and an alarming backlash against gender equality.

This means that everyone - including businesses and their leaders - will be increasingly challenged on the courage of their convictions.

We can already see it happening.

Take, for example, the stinging backlash against diversity, equity and inclusion policies being delivered by the Trump administration's policies.

Unfortunately, we've seen a wave of businesses - many large, well-known corporations, such as Meta, Amazon and the Bank of America - scrapping or proactively rolling back their DEI programs.

Unsurprisingly, in many cases, it's led to a decline in employee morale and in the retention of diverse employees, as well as fewer women in leadership roles.

Pleasingly though, we've seen other big businesses - such as Apple, Costco and Delta Air Lines - staying true to their values and overwhelmingly rejecting the pressure to abandon their DEI initiatives.

At the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, which I chair, we have been shining a light on the failure of many diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives to garner support from all workers and to land with impact. We must get better at explaining the benefits for all and structuring programs that work.

But the underlying values must be preserved. Just like the founders of this university believed doors should be open, not slammed in people's faces because of their religion, social status or gender, so should our

world today be striving to dismantle all the remaining barriers of gender, race, class and disability which unfairly hold people back.

For those of you aspiring to become a business leader in this complex era, I encourage you to consider the question: how will you respond when challenged on the courage of your convictions?

Will you remain true to your values? Will you refuse to be influenced by outside noise? Will you use your leadership for good?

Because strong leadership - whether it be in business, politics or any other field - has never mattered more than it does now.

In my own life, I have had the opportunity to lead in many contexts, from student politics to the Prime Ministership to my current post-politics career as Chair of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership and the Wellcome Trust.

I know for sure that I don't have all the answers on how to lead in this age fraught with challenges. But I do think I have few insights about holding firm when the going gets tough.

What has always sustained me, steadied me, on hard days, is being clear about my own sense of purpose. What difference I want to make in the world and trying to nurture a sense of self that is open to the constructive criticism of others but doesn't succumb to all the noise. In today's world we are all surrounded by influences that corrode your self-esteem, that whisper or roar that you aren't smart enough, hard-working enough, cool enough, pretty enough, thin enough to succeed.

Ignore that kind of static. You have succeeded at a great university. You deserve your place here today. And while life has a way of throwing up obstacles and setbacks, you are equipped to navigate them, to keep learning how to do better and be better, to win through.

One of the reasons that as Prime Minister, I always loved visiting schools, universities, TAFEs and early learning centres was the sense it gave me of seeing the future being made.

That's the sense I have today. I have so enjoyed sharing this moment with you.

What an honour it is to be here and receive this Honorary Doctorate of Letters.

I thank you.