

*“In Pursuit of Excellence”*

**University of Queensland Commencement Service  
Sunday 25 March 2001 ~ Mayne Hall**

The Hon Paul de Jersey AC, Chief Justice of Queensland

Salutations

The challenge of my topic is not foreign to this audience. The University of Queensland’s by-word is excellence. It was, as recently as two years ago, the Good Universities Guide’s “Australian University of the Year”! Its academic staff are acclaimed. UQ staff regularly receive recognition for excellence in teaching – a shining example is the year 2000 Prime Minister’s Australian Award for Individual University Teacher of the Year, awarded to Professor of Information Systems Ron Weber.

At the cutting edge of research, the University has spawned redoubtable breakthroughs, including a “world-first for space engineering” – the successful test flight of a “complete scramjet rocket engineering prototype”; the development of a sensor for “high-resolution imaging”, facilitating less invasive organ examination; the development of world-leading antenna systems of diverse application in wireless communications; and the development of a vaccine against Newcastle Disease, the disease which can produce a 100 percent mortality rate in chickens, especially serious for villagers in developing countries – and those villagers have now been taught to produce the new vaccine themselves, by UQ veterinary pathologists.<sup>i</sup>

The University has produced a commanding array of fine graduates – its eminent alumni include the current State Governor and Premier, former Governors, a former Governor-General and a former Chief Justice of Australia, Nobel Prize Laureate and 1997 Australian of the Year Professor Peter Doherty, three times Miles Franklin Award winner Ms Thea Astley, award-winning poet and novelist Mr David Malouf, recent USA Woman of the Year Professor Veronica James, Academy Award winner Geoffrey Rush, and many others – including, no doubt, many of you, ladies and gentlemen! I speak, then, to an audience discerning in matters of skill, striving and high achievement – I hope I may nonetheless succeed in saying something diverting!

An old master once counselled me that extolling one's audience is an auspicious way at least to begin: but I assure you I do so sincerely!

Explicitly pursuing excellence has become more than a tad unpopular in today's society. With such concentration on promoting equality and eliminating discrimination, the perceived inequality where a state of excellence is attained, the discrimination, the acuity necessary accurately to discern higher functioning, mean the pursuit of excellence is not infrequently condemned as unacceptably 'elitist'. Yet equality of opportunity and excellence are not mutually exclusive – indeed the latter may give dimension to the former, transporting the avenue for achievement to a higher estate.

Delivering the keynote address on the occasion of the conferment of the Prix Latsis Universitaires at the University of Geneva in 1995, Sir Ralf Dahrendorf, explaining

“Why Excellence Matters”, contended it is possible to be both equal and excellent. Indeed, he asserted, “equality alone is stifling and ultimately dead”.<sup>ii</sup> Equality of opportunity, embracing fundamental human rights as well as access to markets, employment and social participation, is “only one half of the life chances which people seek and deserve. The other half has to do with the opportunities themselves.”<sup>iii</sup> Sir Dahrendorf argues that to be meaningful, true opportunity requires choice, and illustrates by reference to the vacuous claim of “freedom of information” where only one media source exists. The variety of opportunities must be scalar, not merely lateral. He went even so far as to contend somewhat provocatively that “inequality is not only compatible with citizenship, but highly desirable.”<sup>iv</sup> When basic equality of opportunity exists, but a variety of possible outcomes of choices also exists – then our opportunities to develop as individuals are the most meaningful. Only then, I might add, will we be encouraged really to strive to seek to fulfil our potential. A trammelling into uniformity, especially if pegged at a level low in the spectrum, produces the utterly intolerable: aridity.

The pursuit of excellence is a quest without end. As with wisdom or humility, we would never rightly see ourselves as truly “excellent” – although we may note such a quality in others. Even so – how can we ever ultimately comprehend excellence? For to comprehend it is to excel. Per Alexander the Great: “I assure you I had rather excel others in the knowledge of what is excellent, than in the extent of my power and dominion.”<sup>v</sup> The Oxford Dictionary suggests excellence is “...the possession chiefly of good qualities in an eminent or unusual degree; surpassing merit, skill, virtue, worth, etc; dignity, eminence.” But exactly which good values must one possess to

that unusual degree in order to excel? And to what unusual degree? Should we surrender to Jonathan Edwards' view: "There has nothing been more without a definition than excellency; although it be what we are most concerned with: yea, we are concerned with nothing else"?<sup>vi</sup>

In Australia, for some, excellence is synonymous with sporting prowess. Was it not Donald Horne who acknowledged that to play or watch games was 'to fulfil one's role as an Australian'? I will not dwell on this point, beyond recalling Professor Doherty's response to the query whether, "as a scientist, [he is] in some way disturbed by the tremendous emphasis on sport in this country." His response, itself rather sporting: "Why should those of us who have had the opportunity to be good at one thing knock people who make an effort and have real ability in any other acceptable area of human activity!"<sup>vii</sup>

But that aspect of arguable national myopia aside, Australians are generally perceptive, I believe, in their conception of excellence. True excellence requires more than even skill, ability, intellect and accomplishment. All those qualities, vast though they be, are hollow if they exist in a moral vacuum. History is littered with brilliant figures who might have been thought to embody excellence had they only used their talents for good. Excellence does encompass moral virtue, and that is something Australians perceive well. Witness our rejection of drug-enhanced athletes, our derision for corrupt politicians. Witness the uplifting of the Australian psyche when our armed forces secured peace in East Timor – the nation respectfully embraces Lieutenant General Peter Cosgrove for his skilful leadership of the Army, but

particularly for his skilfully directing the Interfet force to secure victory by peaceful means.

I will return to morality. But first I revert to our purpose tonight – marking the commencement of the new university year. Each of us is drawn here by belief in this institution, and in the university as an institution. Universities themselves play a key role in the fostering and achievement of excellence. Within universities there exists constant striving towards greater knowledge, higher learning, deeper insight – towards academic excellence. Universities enhance the functioning of individual people. Through education, the individual is enlightened, inspired to continue to strive. This in turn enhances the aggregation of society.

It is widely accepted that education of citizens shapes society. As John Passmore summed, “so many important philosophers, from Plato to Bertrand Russell, by way of Locke, Rousseau and Dewey have seen in education a topic quite central to their views about human life and human society.”<sup>viii</sup>

I was interested to read an article by Professor David Kirp comparing five tertiary institutions located in and around Chicago: the University of Chicago itself, the University of Illinois-Chicago, two private colleges – De Vry University and the online institution Cardean University, and intriguingly, if not to this psyche extraordinarily, Hamburger University – the corporate training facility of fast food chain McDonalds. He reported each faced, in its own way, not-dissimilar challenge, a challenge now-long current here – how to bring, into harmony, considerations both

academic and economic. He noted dissonance within Chicago University in response to reforms increasing student enrolments and reducing course numbers, the University of Illinois-Chicago's attempts to enhance its prestige through recruiting well-known academics, the effects of the increasing attractiveness of vocational, for-profit tertiary institutions, and the tension within Hamburger University as faculty members (should we say, the "mac-ademics"?) kicked against a managerial shift towards cheaper regional training, because it ignored the "iconic importance" of the on-campus experience. The comparison raised, he said, "important, troubling questions about where higher education is heading and how it is to be guided by those who care about it"<sup>ix</sup> : a sententious observation, I suppose, but true.

We are all keenly aware of these concerns, and I won't dwell on them now. In my confident opinion, Professor Kirp's concerns would be out of place at this particular institution – where interestingly focus on academic and moral excellence is in an immediate sense attested by this very service. Indeed UQ, with its unabashed focus on excellence, is the kind of university students actively seek to attend, not the kind they would leave for want of intellectual challenge, as you may with regret have read recently, in The Times, of a British university.<sup>x</sup>

There has inevitably been intensive academic consideration of the function of universities. Foolhardy perhaps, but may I venture if only an inch into this? Universities have sometimes been defined by reference to a central aim – the pursuit of learning – with "add-ons": the more "peripheral" activities of, dare I say it, teaching, conferring degrees and preparing students for life.<sup>xi</sup> Sometimes the pundit

has proffered an “exhaustive list”: conserving knowledge, transmitting knowledge, advancing and applying knowledge, refining knowledge, accrediting for professional qualifications, and, of “arguably most” importance – acting as society’s “critic” and “conscience”<sup>xii</sup>: both exhaustive and in practice, one would think, exhausting!

But central to all these various descriptions is the ideal of greater learning, pursuing truth. In an article provocatively titled “Do we need universities? Things that must not be said in public”, Dr Simon Leys argues that in this pursuit of “truth for truth’s sake”, “the university constitutes the ultimate cornerstone of all humanist and liberal values, since it affirms that the truth can never be manipulated or monopolised by some Supreme Leader, Great Teacher, Grandiose Guide of Infallible Party, and maintains that, before truth, all men are equal.”<sup>xiii</sup> This is borne out by human history – where totalitarian regimes routinely oppress free-thinking, truth-seeking academics. The pursuit of truth is also fundamental to societal advancement. Universities exist, boldly, “to stand at the frontiers of knowledge and to push those frontiers steadily back”.<sup>xiv</sup>

We people of this great nation now stand at our own frontier, celebrating 100 years of federation – a unique milestone of profound significance. The fathers of federation, including notably my judicial predecessor Sir Samuel Griffith, brought, to the enormous task of drafting a new constitution and convincing their countrymen of the merits of federation, a rich, classic liberal education. They drew on the lessons of history in shaping the then future of the nation.<sup>xv</sup> As we accelerate into the next hundred years, our leaders should ideally be similarly equipped. The challenges are

new – to excel notwithstanding, we will need leaders skilled in creative and “sympathetic” imagination – to develop our nation, while maintaining, strengthening, harmony within a comparatively newly diverse society.<sup>xvi</sup>

The students nurtured here this year will rank among those who will likely determine the nature of our society, and include potential decision-makers, leaders. We must embrace the responsibility, as Professor Geoffrey Bolton put it last year, “of ensuring that Australia’s decision-makers of the twenty-first century are women and men whose cultural breadth and humane values at least equal those of individuals such as Barton and Deakin who created the Australian Commonwealth”<sup>xvii</sup>... and I would add Griffith, probably putting him first!

In a fascinating article titled “Technicians of Learning”, Mr Edward Tingley has challenged the model of tertiary education attractive to some. He argues focus on obtaining a good knowledge of one’s field is inappropriate – to be *educated* means something more.

Tingley reminds that “education” traditionally addressed “certain questions – questions that, in effect, constituted the substance of the humanities, especially in those regions that dealt with created representations of human life: the works taught in departments of philosophy and religion, picturing the “first things” of a human life, or of English and art history, regaling us with all forms of human business.”<sup>xviii</sup>

But the 19th century brought transformation. The new focus crystallised on individual disciplines, with students instructed in the knowledge of particular fields. Of this development, Tingley is highly critical. He argues "...in this thinking and the idea of *knowledge* at its root, the whole business of *education* lost its place. The humanities embarked, eager to deliver, on a revolutionary path and simply fell into step with the buzz of the age: progressive manufacture ... (so that) learning is now a traffic in *information*, in material that has achieved commodity status precisely by disengaging itself from the problems of human life."<sup>xi</sup> Therefore, he argues, we all lose – “With modern knowledge we are not “satisfying a direct need of our nature in its very acquisition” – the idea of learning from Aristotle to Newman. Nothing can be done with this knowledge except to have it ... the modern person is one who “has no longer any knowledge of anything except himself, his machines, and his knowledge that he knows what he knows”.”<sup>xx</sup> To Tingley, university education should be more than processing knowledge – it should be an active learning process. And of course he is right!

Tingley’s views are echoed in the works of one person who I suggest may be nominated for the rank of the truly great, Sir William Osler – one of seven founders of the Johns Hopkins Hospital and medical school, an institution “by whose example not only education was radically altered, but also an entire philosophy of patient care and research”.<sup>xxi</sup> One of Osler’s many “pedagogical innovations” was “‘the natural method’ of teaching” – whereby students left lecture halls to learn their trade in the wards. Osler expressed the purpose of his then-innovative method: “The student begins with the patient, continues with the patient, and ends with the patient...[T]each

him how to observe, give him plenty of facts to observe, and the lessons will come out of the facts themselves... [T]he best teaching is taught by the patient himself.”<sup>xxii</sup> Osler discarded the accumulation of great knowledge of medicine in favour of a life-long journey of discovery about humanity. He once wrote: “A doctor does not treat typhoid fever, but he treats the man with typhoid, and it is the man with his peculiarities – his bodily idiosyncracies we have to consider.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Throughout his life he emphasised “the careful consideration which is given to every circumstance in the life and condition of the individual.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Like others, I would offer Sir William Osler as a model of excellence. He has been described as a great doctor and scientist, “the greatest clinical teacher of his day”, one who never failed to pay heed to moral considerations, indeed “the very physician that we have idealised.”<sup>xxv</sup> It doesn’t end there – he was also, splendidly enough, “[h]andsome and witty... a favourite at Philadelphia social evenings.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Closer to home, Professor Doherty adroitly illustrates the characteristics of a “champion” with a play on the word, on the word “champion” that is – recall the amusing Churchillian story about the Massachusetts Institute of Technology! For his part, Professor Doherty assigned ‘C’ for courage, ‘H’ for ‘hutzpah’ (a variant on the Yiddish ‘chutzpah’), ‘A’ for application, ‘M’ for madness, ‘P’ for persistence and ‘O’ for originality, while ‘I’ stood for integrity, and ‘N’ for nobility.<sup>xxvii</sup> If there were another ‘H’, I would add ‘humility’, and there in good philosophical company : Socrates’ message to the statesman included a warning ‘against the danger of being dazzled by his own power, excellence and wisdom’ – to him, “what matters most

[was] that we are all frail human beings”.<sup>xxviii</sup> Likewise, Professor John W Gardner recognised the danger of societal arrogance in relation to excellence: “The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Following that theme, you may think me remiss were I to omit mention of another currently large challenge for universities: meeting the demand of understandably utilitarian industry lobby groups, a demand – sometimes attractive to executive government – for rather narrow tertiary concentration : the information, particular skills approach. With the crucial need to secure necessarily limited government funding, it is disheartening to see some wonderfully talented – indeed “excellent”, Vice Chancellors having to enter the bear-pit to bid for that funding: indeed, as must modern day Chief Justices of under-resourced courts! There is no easy resolution to these tensions. But are they necessarily negative in impact? That they exist does I suppose sometimes stimulate constructive consideration, response!

I mentioned at the outset some of the university’s various expressions of excellence. May I add, to that impressive list, the outstanding care provided to its students, concern for their personal development? The Chaplaincy service in particular must be recognised for its outstanding work. This is enabled by the commendable support of the churches – too often taken for granted. For many students, the span of tertiary

education is turbulent. The Chaplaincy service regularly helps restore constructive calm.

That brings me back to the relevance of morality. Views differ on the role morality plays in university studies. Welcoming new students to the University of Chicago in 1998, Professor John Mearsheimer listed “teaching morality” as one of “The Non-aims of Education at Chicago”.<sup>xxx</sup> He asserted that “[t]oday, elite universities operate on the belief that there is a clear separation between intellectual and moral purpose, and they pursue the former while largely ignoring the latter.”<sup>xxxix</sup> His views did not find favour with Ms Eva Brann, Dean Emerita and tutor at St John’s College, Annapolis.

Disagreeing, she advocated the incorporation, within general studies, of particular issues of morality – not as distinct subject areas – but where “moral contingencies.. come up within the school”, “questions of human goodness and excellence should be given occasion to arise for contemplation.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

To my mind, that approach is plainly to be preferred. Questions of morality may not necessarily be central to mastering a particular field of study, but their contemplation where related to academic issues is essential to the wise application of knowledge. Witness the current, deeply disturbing human cloning debate. As philosopher Raimond Gaita wrote a decade ago, “We may achieve that deeper understanding we call wisdom only if we have the depth to receive it, and that depth includes moral and

spiritual virtues of a kind quite different from those virtues which are needed for even the highest academic distinction.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Gaita has reached the heart of the matter : the best education involves the mining of intellect, soul, heart, wisdom, through mature thought and action – it aims to produce wisdom, rather than mere cleverness. It encourages excellence. And this ultimately sits comfortably with pervasive Christian philosophy – recall the Parable of the Talents.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

I again acknowledge I speak tonight to people highly discerning in matters of excellence. I hope my reflections have been of interest. The start of an academic year is a fitting time to reflect on priorities. An overriding commitment to excellence must predominate. In the words of Aristotle, “Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

I have suggested our national orientation is rather “fixated” upon sport. A challenge for us all is to elevate that to an equally habitual, but more general, striving for excellence. A mere moment’s reflection would embolden us to challenge the universities to lead in that!

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- <sup>i</sup> University of Queensland website: “10 great research breakthroughs at UQ”, [www.uq.edu.au/about/profile/research/breakthroughs.html](http://www.uq.edu.au/about/profile/research/breakthroughs.html)
- <sup>ii</sup> Dahrendorf, R. “Why Excellence Matters”. In R. Dahrendorf, 1997, *After 1989: Morals, Revolution and Civil Society*. St Martin’s Press: New York, pp 61 – 67, p 62
- <sup>iii</sup> *id*
- <sup>iv</sup> *Ibid*, p 63
- <sup>v</sup> Plutarch, *Lives: Alexander*
- <sup>vi</sup> Jonathan Edwards in ‘Works’ Vol 1 p 693
- <sup>vii</sup> Doherty, P. “A Scientist looks at the Australian Experience”, *The Sydney Papers*, Spring 1998, 101-112, p 110
- <sup>viii</sup> Passmore, J. “Educating for the Twenty-First Century: The Romantics and the Disciplines”, *Quadrant*, August 1985, 11-19, p 11
- <sup>ix</sup> Kirp, D. “A City of Learning”, *University Business*, February 2001; online at [www.universitybusiness.com/0101/feature\\_city\\_learning.html](http://www.universitybusiness.com/0101/feature_city_learning.html)
- <sup>x</sup> Furedi, F. “Why I think universities are becoming anti-intellectual”, *The Times*, 26 January 2001, p 16
- <sup>xi</sup> Hamlyn, D. “The Concept of a University”, *Philosophy*, 1996 vol 71, 205-218, p 212
- <sup>xii</sup> Lowe, I. “The Changing Nature of Universities”, *Wiser*, 1995 no 2, 11-15, p 12
- <sup>xiii</sup> Leys, S. “Do we need universities? Things that must not be said in public”. In S. Leys, 1999, *The Angel and the Octopus: Collected Essays, 1983-1998*. Duffy and Snellgrove: Potts Point, 245-258, p 257
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hamlyn, D. “The Concept of a University”, p 206
- <sup>xv</sup> Bolton, G. “National Building – The Next 100 Years of the Australian Experiment”, JM Ward Lecture, Sydney, October 2000.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Concepts of “disciplined imagination” and “sympathetic imagination” are explored by John Passmore in “Educating for the Twenty-First Century”, pp 17 - 19
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bolton, G. “National Building”, p 20
- <sup>xviii</sup> Tingley, E. “Technicians of Learning”, *First Things*, August/September 2000, 29-35, online at [www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0008/articles/tingley.html](http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0008/articles/tingley.html)
- <sup>xix</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xx</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xxi</sup> Nuland, SB. “The Saint”, *The New Republic Online*, 1999 vol 221(24), 27 – 33, online at [www.tnr.com/121399/nuland121399.html](http://www.tnr.com/121399/nuland121399.html) – a review of the book “William Osler: A Life in Medicine” by Michael Bliss, Oxford University Press
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Id*
- <sup>xxvii</sup> McNicoll, DD. “Nobel Prize Winner Spells Out What it Takes to be Champ”, *The Australian*, 9 May 2000
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Dahrendorf, R. “Why Excellence Matters”, p 67
- <sup>xxix</sup> Gardner, JW. 1961. “Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?”
- <sup>xxx</sup> Mearsheimer, JJ. “The Aims of Education”, *Philosophy and Literature*, 1998 vol 22(1), 137-155, p 147-8
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid*, p 150
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Brann, ETH. “When Does Amorality Become Immorality?”, *Philosophy and Literature*, 1998 vol 22(1), 166-170, p 170
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Gaita, R. “Goodness and Truth”, *Quadrant*, June 1991, 40-47, p 41
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Matthew Chapter 25, verses 14-30
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