

**UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA**  
**GRADUATION SPEECH – Justin Garrick**

Good evening, Vice-Chancellor, members of the Faculty, ladies and gentlemen, and most especially those graduating tonight, to whom I offer my sincerest congratulations. It is an honour and a great pleasure to have been invited to share this important occasion with you; to enjoy seeing the pride on the faces of those collecting their degrees: that sense of accomplishment mixed with no small measure of relief too, I am sure. I know that feeling. I wish you every happiness in your well-earned achievement and I hope that you will each rightly celebrate in style.

In addition to the honour of being here to witness your happiness in graduation, I am grateful for the opportunity to return the compliment paid to Canberra Grammar School by the Chancellor of the University, Dr Tom Calma, who spoke at our own equivalent of this occasion, our Year 12 Valedictory Ceremony, last year. I am also delighted to be here in symbol of the strong and growing friendship between the University of Canberra and Canberra Grammar School, institutions united not just in sharing our city's name, but in our common aspiration to be intrinsic to the prospects and prosperity of this city, our capital.

In my own determination to reinvigorate Canberra Grammar School over the past few years, I have admired the University of Canberra for its evident vitality, its creativity and its integrity in commitment to its community. I have deliberately sought connection with the University, and especially with this Faculty, because I see in it a model for what a vibrant educational institution can be in our capital.

I also know that if school education in Australia is to undergo the profound revolution that it so badly needs in order to break from parochial torpor, then we must construct close and active partnerships between schools and universities that will facilitate the on-going exchange of ideas, skills, perspectives and global connections in the difficult years of dramatic change that, without doubt, lie ahead for us and our students and our society.

That's a provocative statement, I know, especially for an occasion like this, at which traditionally the speaker is supposed to say encouraging things and offer sage advice for the road ahead, not confront you with dire warnings that you are entering or re-entering your chosen profession at a precarious time in history.

Partly, the problem is that I like to think I'm still too young – far, far too young – to go about offering life lessons and sage advice. I'm still working all that stuff out for myself, and if I figure it out one day I'll let you know. In the meantime, I'm not going to patronise you with my half-formed wisdom. In any case, as any good teacher knows, it's more powerful to provoke the questions than to provide the answers. So, I'm going to challenge you with what everything in my experience as an educator, both here and after many years abroad, tells me is the greatest challenge facing our profession for the remainder of my career and the duration of yours.

I challenge you to take what you have learned in your university degrees and to go out from this place with passion; with a driven determination to use your knowledge and your skills and your role as a teacher – a powerful and privileged role – to make a difference; a difference to the lives of every single student that you teach but, beyond that, to create together a badly-needed new era in Australian education; one that breaks us from the

domesticity of small, suburban expectations, that transcends the wasteful bickering of public/private sectoral interests and of state/federal politics, which, between them, have squandered so much educational energy in Australia over decades, and to go out and cast wide the horizons of our children; to strive to do all that you can to put them on par with their peers around the world who are otherwise fast overtaking them in their education and their opportunities.

That world, we know, is changing: its technology, its climate, its social structures and boundaries. It takes no great predictive capacity to see what's already true and to know that the children that we educate now are of the world's first truly global generation. More than any before them, they will live, study and work, make friends, marry, have families, across cultures and languages in an increasingly mobile and permeable world. Make no mistake, the force of globalisation and, specifically, the emergence of Asia as the dominant region of our planet will be the great determinant of our children's time on earth. It is our role as educators to ensure that they're not bystanders to that, and in Australia currently we are failing.

Think of this: in the year I left School, 1990, just 3% of all Chinese school leavers went on to university; only two decades later, that proportion is 30% and growing. In the Year 2000 the number of students enrolled at universities in East Asia equalled for the first time all university students in Europe and North America combined. Since then the number in Asia has grown by an incredible 10% every year, which means that the total number has now almost tripled, dwarfing the number of students in the West in less than the short lifetime of most students currently in high school. In China alone over the same period, the student population has doubled roughly every four years; and that population is, of course, enormous: today alone, more than the entire population of Australia is studying at a university in China.

Sitting here in the quiet sunny wide green bowl of Canberra, it is virtually impossible to comprehend the speed and enormity of what I'm talking about, but by the time students now in our primary schools on to university, one third of all the world's graduates will come from Chinese universities alone: one in every three; and that's not to count what's going on in India and elsewhere across the region; a revolution in education on a scale unprecedented in human history; a seismic shift in the world's intellectual centre of gravity back. (UNESCO, GED, 2009)

Education doesn't get headlines like a mining boom, but it is far far far more significant and will have greater and longer lasting consequences on all of our lives in the decades to come. It is lifting hundreds of millions of people in our region to the standards of living and kinds of careers that we and our students expect and enjoy, and it is a massive stimulus to the global educational economy. Just think of the impact that so many millions of intelligent, motivated, aspirational and educated minds will have on the prospects of humanity: on scientific research, biomedical technology, pharmaceutical development, engineering, construction, urban planning, agriculture, manufacturing, computing, information technology, , climate science, renewable energy, law, politics, defence, art, music, literature, education itself; on every single field of endeavour that any of our students could conceivably choose to enter.

And therein lies their opportunity. Think of their chance to be part of that; and think of our prospects if they're not.

And yet what is our response? We all know the woeful statistics on the take-up of languages in Australia, let alone Asian languages which more than 94% of Australian students give up before they reach Year 12; and that's 94% of the small proportion that even start. In Higher School Certificate History, for example, 84% of all candidates were entered for European options when last checked; just 2% were entered for options on China, our largest trading partner, the largest country on earth, the only superpower rival to the United States and one of the most enduring and influential cultures on the planet; less than 4% were entered for options on India, Japan and Indonesia combined, despite their population, proximity and impact on modern Australia. The pattern is similar in subject after subject in virtually every state and territory across the country. (AEF, Studies of Asia in Year 12, 2009)

We can't even negotiate a national curriculum through our parochial state and territory interests let alone maintain its proposed focus on the study of Asia. The best chance at school funding reform in a generation was squandered and finally abandoned last year. Despite former Prime Minister Gillard's admirable personal commitment to school education, her Government spent its time in office overburdening us with a massive and uninspiring technocratic framework of complex and semi-developed initiatives, and then was blown apart before it finished the job, leaving us with the current Government, which has at no stage ever expressed any vision for school education. In fact, with barely a public word said about it, they have virtually dismantled all Commonwealth infrastructure for schooling, washed their hands of the nation's children and shunted everything back to the states. Let's not even mention their approach to higher education reform.

And I remind you of what I said before is going on in Asia. Clearly, we can't leave it to the politicians. It's up to us; and there is my challenge to you. It can't be left to the future; it has to start now; it has to start at every level – primary, secondary, tertiary – and it has to start with us; with you; the educators of now and tomorrow, because failure on the part of Australian education to rise to what's going on beyond our shores is a guaranteed strategy for irrelevance: irrelevance for our children, irrelevance for our educational institutions, irrelevance for our national future.

Of course, individually we can't reform the system, but we can each lift our students' aspirations and we can work with individuals to make them see their potential. In reality, there's not much more to education than that. I was asked by one of the University of Canberra MTeach students we hosted at Canberra Grammar School last week, what theory of pedagogy I find most inspiring; and I know I was expected to quote Hattie or someone as everyone does. But in the end, for me, it all comes down to this: great teachers teach students. There is no other secret to great schooling than that. All the IT, and all the curriculum change and all the pedagogical innovations in the world cannot compensate for simply knowing and teaching your students, supporting their individual needs, paying attention to their individual progress, nurturing their personal aspirations and celebrating their triumphs as we are doing for you tonight.

I know you will all do that but, as you do, remember at every opportunity to lift their eyes above the horizon and to be ready for a world that is rushing towards them faster than we can imagine, as it is towards us all. Go enjoy it. My every good wish for all that comes hereafter, and my congratulations once again. Thank you.