

**UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA**  
**GRADUATION SPEECH – Stephen Parker**

Thank you chancellor.

Ladies and gentlemen, I've said quite enough in this ceremony already and in the previous seven this week. I'm a bit over the sound of my own voice, as my colleagues must be too.

But this, as you have heard, is the last ever such ceremony I will attend as a vice-chancellor, and I was asked if I would accept the honour of giving the graduation address as well.

I would like to focus on the kind of world that our graduates will be moving into. I am going to make some comments about the pace of change in the world that they are entering and finish with some comments about a challenge that we will all face if we feel strongly about social justice.

The pace of change

It's become a cliché to say that the pace of change in the world is increasing. But it is much harder to grasp the enormity of what I think is coming our way. It's not just fast, it's big.

Now, history is littered with thoughtful people getting things completely wrong when it comes to change.

In 1825 one of Britain's leading engineers said that the idea of a train travelling at over 30 mph was preposterous (but it happened within 5 years).

In 1901 Wilbur Wright said "man will not fly for 50 years". He and his brother Orvill actually accomplished it within two.

In 1927, HM Warner asked "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" In fact, almost everyone did, as he and his brother found out with their Warner Brothers' talkie film *The Jazz Singer*.

In 1943, Thomas Watson, the chairman of IBM, said "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers".

And it all seemed perfectly reasonable at the time, from clever and informed people, speaking about their own area.

The common theme here is how we can underestimate the imminence and impact of technological change.

As one 19th century writer put it, in the language of the time: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it".

The late, great Douglas Adams – author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* - said that there are three types of technology.

There is the technology invented before you were born, which you don't think of even as technology - it's just normal.

There is the technology invented during your life but before, say, you were middle-aged: such as for us the internet or the mobile phone, which you kind of like, and which makes you feel modern and hip.

And then there is the technology invented after you are middle-aged, which you regard as completely pointless and simply makes you angry. I know people who don't use Twitter but who are just angry that it exists.

Well, I'm now going to take the same risk of getting things completely wrong or showing my age.

I think we are only at the dawning of the digital age. I think it has barely begun. As machine intelligence and automation really develop, there will be massive disruption to the workforce and to society.

Two scholars from Oxford University have examined how susceptible jobs are to computerisation. They concluded that within 20 years near half of all the current jobs in the USA could be automated away.

Last year, the foundation for young Australians released a report called “the new work order” with some similar and startling conclusions. Seventy per cent of young people currently enter the workforce into jobs that will be radically affected by automation.

3D printing, or additive manufacturing, will collapse many industries. If cosmetics, for example, mainly have the same underlying paste, why won't we just create our own in the bathroom, adding the colour and scent that we choose.

If pharmaceuticals can be printed, once out of patent why do you need a pharmaceutical company. Just make them yourself.

And 3D printing on the nanoscale is on its way – this is 1/80,000 of the width of a human hair.

Imagine microchips on this scale woven into everything; into pillows in hospitals giving feedback about vital signs; into sports gear, whatever. The internet of things. In fact, almost anything can be made "smart" - except perhaps some of the occupants of this building.

Common to all this is the taking out of the middle, and the creation of direct links between suppliers and consumers, professionals and clients, information and its end-user.

The new economy is relatively weightless. This means that weighty institutions, whether they are political parties, universities, the encyclopedia Britannica, can all fall, partly because of the democratising power that digital communication can bring.

A challenge to us all

Opinions will differ as to who will be the winners and who the losers from all this massive change, and in particular whether the winners will out-number the losers.

It is very possible that all of today's graduates will be winners because although you have worked hard and have talent, you have also been able to access a good university, with a rising reputation.

But we can't stop there. Only 30% to 40% of young people go to university. We can't embrace a world where 60% to 70% are increasingly left behind. Furthermore, a young Australian who goes to university today is over 4 times more likely to have a parent who went to university than one who does not. Higher education is at risk of becoming a form of inherited advantage.

So the second part of my address is about the society we are in danger of settling for.

Graduates, you may have thought that your days of lectures were well and truly over. Well not quite, but you don't need to take notes. I need to introduce you to the Gini coefficient.

Broadly, if all the income in a society were owned by just one person the Gini coefficient would be 1. If it were all shared absolutely equally the coefficient would be zero. Therefore, the closer the coefficient is to zero, the more equal is the society, in terms of income distribution.

Australia's Gini coefficient has risen in the last twenty years and it is now above the OECD average; in other words we are becoming more unequal in terms of income, over time, and compared with similar economies.

If you look at total wealth rather than income, the picture is even worse, with the wealthiest in Australia owning massively more than the poorest, and with the gap increasing not decreasing.

Opinions will differ about all this, but most people agree that whatever inequality is out there, we want there to be equal opportunity; we want social mobility. We want people to be able move up in the world and not be held back by accident of birth, inherited disadvantage or events beyond their control.

Unfortunately, it seems that social mobility is stalling in Australia. People born poor are likely to stay poor, with limited exceptions. People born into affluence will stay in affluence, with very limited exceptions.

More than anything else we have believed in the recent past that it was education that would break this cycle, and there have been periods in modern times when that has definitely been true.

But the school system is very uneven. Children from schools in poor areas are much less likely to go to university.

Higher education is becoming more expensive with graduate debt levels rising.

Within the last two years the government has tried to pass laws which would cut 20% from university budgets and take the ceiling off student fees, with the likely consequence that fees would rise by possibly 300%. I was the only Vice-Chancellor to oppose this publicly, and the proposals were defeated twice in the senate.

Something may come back in next month's budget – we are being softened up for it in the media this week by misleading stories about unpaid student debt (misleading because the problem is really in vocational education not in higher education).

But the full deregulation package will be back after the next election, unless thwarted by the electorate. That is, a 20% cut to government funding, an opening up of places and loans to the private sector, and then a deregulation of the fees that universities can charge.

Just before the last election the previous prime minister announced there would be no cuts to education, a promise which he attempted to break within months. The question will now arise how one can believe that a cut would only be 20% if the government is returned to power. Why wouldn't it be 40% or more? That's the problem with breaches of promise. The replacement promises aren't believed.

I will no longer be in a position to influence things but I hope this university will do all that it can to ensure that education remains available to everyone with talent and commitment. Our job is not to groom extra privilege onto the already privileged. It is to transform people's lives through the power of education, to kickstart social mobility again and put Australia back on track as a fair society which is not run by elites in the interests of elites.

If tumultuous change is coming our way through technology and global forces, let's redouble our efforts to create a fair society where it is talent and effort, not privilege, which distributes the rewards.

I have said my bit, but I should finish on a different sense of the word privilege. It has been my privilege to serve as the vice-chancellor for over nine years. We have come a long way, but as with any complex institution, we will always be a work in progress.

I would like to thank the chancellor, Tom Calma AO, the first indigenous man to be Chancellor of an Australian university, previous Chancellors John Mackay and Ingrid Moses, members of the governing council, colleagues (academic and professional), the ever-cheerful graduations staff, and finally all the students, who are the lifeblood of a university.

During my time I am told that 25 000 students have graduated. I have seen a lot pass before me on the stage. I've seen the bold and confident. I've seen the shy and tentative.

I've heard some amazing speeches on this stage. I have seen some amazing students who have achieved against all the odds.

I've seen an amazing range of shoes, from sneakers, to "sensible", to what looked more like scaffolding than footwear at all.

As a University of Canberra graduate I know you will be successful, but I hope you use your success to make your country a fair country.

Thank you for your support. Good luck to you all.

As the late Two Ronnie's said, it's goodnight from me.