

University of Canberra Education Faculty Graduation, Occasional Address

Ross Fox, 26 March 2025

Introduction

Good evening and thank you. I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are gathered on. The Nganawal people and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I also acknowledge:

Chancellor, Lisa Paul

Vice-chancellor and President, The Hon Bill Shorten

Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education, Professor Barney Dalgarno

Members of university executive, faculty and professional staff

Distinguished Guests

Most importantly graduands together with their families, friends and guests

It is a tremendous honour to be asked to speak to you as you mark this very significant achievement.

I offer my sincere and heartfelt congratulations to today's graduands.

As the holder of two university degrees I can empathise with the graduands.

I know the commitment, persistence, grit and determination required to complete a university degree.

Graduands you deserve to take time to celebrate today.

A university degree is awarded to one person. But every person is part of a human community. No student can do all they need to succeed at university without the support of family, friends, faculty and professional staff.

Congratulations and thank you to the family and friends present today for your support of the graduates.

The University of Canberra is a very esteemed institution nationally and internationally.

According to Barro and Lee (2015) the share of the population globally estimated to have either completed or partially completed tertiary education in 2020 was less than 16%.

If you took all of the people who have lived in the world in the last two hundred years the graduates here today are easily in the most educated top 10% on the basis of education alone.

Successfully graduating with a university qualification places graduates amongst a cohort of the most educated scholars in all of human history.

In 2022 Australia was ranked 5th in the OECD (out of 28 countries listed) for the percentage of the population holding a Bachelor's degree or equivalent at 29% of the population.

Graduates you now take your place amidst one of the most educated societies that has ever existed.

Our continued success as a nation will depend on what we learn and know. How we apply knowledge to the benefit of humanity. You are well placed to do this and expectations for your contribution will rightly be high.

It is a great time to be alive and a great time to be Australian. Even more so with a qualification from the University of Canberra.

Australia is one of the most diverse, prosperous, peaceful countries in the world today. Wonderful natural beauty. Limitless human potential. Many, many blessings and arguably still a land of opportunity welcoming so many from other countries to join and shape the continuing Australian story.

We also have our challenges to face.

I assume that many present have chosen teaching as a career. At least for now.

If so, you will be part of something significant. Education, particularly school education will be both the source of challenges and the solution to challenges we face.

It was Robert Menzies, Australia's twelfth and longest serving Prime Minister who wrote, and I quote, "... over the entrance to every school might well be written in letters of gold the words, "Here we deal with the future"".

In becoming a teacher you are shaping the future. Of our community. Of our nation. Of the world.

There are many special things about teachers and teaching. One is that you will long be remembered by those you teach.

Good teaching from an expert, caring adult can transform the life trajectory of an individual student.

If we pause and reflect on our own schooling everyone can think of one teacher, perhaps more, who left an indelible mark on our learning, growth and development as a person.

It might have been an act of kindness. A wise word. A well delivered lesson to transmit a difficult foundational concept.

For me it was Mr Purcell. My grade four teacher who introduced me to creative artistic expression and show me the virtue in pursuing knowledge and understanding. Gave me confidence and challenged me to be better every day. It might just be a coincidence that he is the only male teacher that I recall having in primary school.

As your homework, if you haven't been in touch recently, this week you should reach out to that teacher who comes to your mind and share your educational success with them and what they meant to you.

I know they will be deeply grateful for the contact.

You might also recall a teacher who wasn't enthusiastic about your future prospects. Many of us can think of one. In the most charitable spirit possible I encourage you to make contact with them. Let them know of your success today and thank them for what they did despite your perceptions all those years ago. Or maybe not.

Let their memory be a lesson that we should always carry a torch with the highest hopes for the future prospects of every student whether we like the individual student or not. I hope you are able to navigate this challenge in your teaching career and work life.

As a Catholic educational leader, having worked at the most senior levels of Catholic education in Australia, for fifteen years. I want to share some observations about school education in Australia.

My most recent experience was leading 56 schools, with 23,000 students across 1,000 classrooms for eight years.

I have never taught a class. Rather I have obsessed about how best to support every teacher in each and every classroom.

In my first year as Director in Canberra I spent a lot of time talking to teachers, principals, parents and students. Listening intently to their experience of school – both good and bad, their priorities, hopes, dreams and fears.

Commonly I asked children what they planned to do after school. It wasn't long before a grade 2 child told me they wanted to be a social media influencer.

This was a job that didn't exist when I was at school in the 80s and 90s. It made concrete to me that for that young boy to reach his ambition school really did have to prepare him for the potential of a job that might not yet exist.

There is one conversation with a mother at a primary school that I recall very clearly. Let's call her Jan. It's not her real name.

Jan was effusive about the welcoming nature of the school. The kindness of the principal and teachers. The pastoral care and the sense of community. Jan was very enthusiastic about the school. But it was her final point that struck me.

Jan said to me "It is just a pity about the NAPLAN and academic results."

The NAPLAN she referred to is the national test that is taken by every student in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 every year. It tests reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy.

From that conversation with Jan I was so pleased that our schools were valued. But devastatingly we were not meeting her expectations for what must be the core work of schools – learning.

Maybe this critique is not relevant to other schools or systems. If you are beginning a teaching career, are an experienced teacher, or have children at school I know that you will be well placed to judge the relevance of this critique for yourself very soon.

It is great that schools are valued as caring, welcoming communities. They must always be safe places for children.

But it is not acceptable that under normal circumstances schools cannot meet reasonable expectations for learning and academic outcomes.

This conversation prompted me to look very hard at our academic results.

Too often I found that the academic achievement of our students was modest, sometimes mediocre and sometimes very poor.

In some schools 50% of students in some grades needed reading intervention according to the assessments we were using. This is not what success looks like.

Overwhelmingly our schools were not adding value accounting for the background of our students and school communities.

Every school must aspire to be a welcoming, caring community AND provide great learning for every student.

It took a lot of reflection to acknowledge all was not as it should be. From that point, as a system of schools, we went on a profound journey to improve learning and teaching.

Much was changed. Including:

- We taught early reading consistent with the 'Science of Reading'. This was largely achieved by adopting the Initialit program from Multilit for early primary literacy lessons.
- Our approach to teaching changed to be consistent with the 'Science of Learning'. Coaches visited every primary classroom to reinforce the change in teaching.
- We increased the expectations for secure acquisition of knowledge in our curriculum and teaching, made high quality instructional materials available to teachers and provided teachers with efficient assessments of learning progress.

With a much longer time I could share insights and stories from the journey. If you are interested and want more detail you can easily find it by searching 'Catalyst' the name we gave our program and 'Canberra Goulburn'.

The emerging results are in. They are just the beginning. Teachers and students enjoyed significant success.

On the NAPLAN reading test for Grade 3 in 2019 compared to like schools 42% of Catholic schools in the ACT were underperforming. By 2022 this dropped to 4%.

In Grade 3 writing and numeracy we achieved similar improvement between 2019 and 2022.

In writing 71% underperforming schools went to 13%.

In numeracy 41% underperforming schools more than halved to 17%.

Our improvement relative to other Catholic education systems was significant and large.

I joined a system with thousands of dedicated, skilled teachers working hard to provide the best schooling for students. The poor academic results were not a reflection on them or their students. It was a reflection on the system they worked in.

We had exactly the right teachers to be amongst the best education systems in the world. I believe this of all Australian education.

Our teachers, school leaders and students have demonstrated that they can achieve great results.

Some dismiss these results as unimportant. But each improvement represents hundreds of children able to do something for themselves that they couldn't otherwise do. Schools and teachers have made a profound difference compared to just a few years earlier.

This is the genuine transformation of lives.

Excitingly the reformed approaches to learning and teaching are significantly advancing equity. Drawing schools in NSW and ACT up to similar high achievement. Overcoming the reality that for too long the background and location of students has determined their academic destiny.

The new approaches to learning and teaching have attracted interest across Australia. The NSW and Victorian public education

systems are adopting similar approaches together with some Catholic systems across the country.

There is no doubt that the University of Canberra has brilliant academics, dedicated professional staff and excellent students. As graduates you know this.

In the last year the ACT public system has committed to reform important aspects of teaching and learning consistent with what we have learnt in our improvement. This follows a report from an expert panel chaired by the Executive Dean of Education, Professor Dalgarno. The University of Canberra's expertise and influence in school education is again evident.

I tell this extended personal story to illustrate that dramatically higher academic achievement is possible. Schools and systems can achieve significantly better results.

Existing students and teachers can do it. In my experience it does not require dramatic changes in funding. Admittedly it is hard work for teachers to change what is being done in classrooms every day. It requires clear priorities and precise expectations of what is taught, how it is taught and how it is assessed.

It requires dedicated and expert teachers such as yourselves.

I am optimistic that higher attainment awaits Australia with the focused professionalism of teachers throughout our schools. Who knows how high we should aim for our students?

Conclusion

However highly you have achieved in your degree may I humbly observe that you will have much more to learn. But you are very well placed with a qualification from the University of Canberra to contribute significantly in your career.

For today's graduates I again offer my congratulations on your achievement. May you enjoy a moment of celebration with family and friends this afternoon and this evening.

To the guests here today to support a graduate thank you for your love and support for an endeavour that is truly worthwhile.

I wish all those who have chosen teaching as a career every success and fulfillment as you continue to develop your craft and expertise.

Enjoy your evening and thank you.