

Natasha Stott Despoja AM, occasional address, 18 April 2019

Thank you Chancellor.

I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Kurna people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, some of you are here today.

It is an honour to share the stage with these distinguished graduands, including those who have worked long and hard for your doctorates.

I thank the University of SA for this generous acknowledgment. There are few honours that could mean this much to me.

My passionate belief in the value of higher education, and that higher education should be publicly-funded and accessible to all was the fire in my belly for becoming a legislator. And I held higher education portfolio for almost 13 years as a Senator.

I grew up imbued with the notion that education is the great equaliser.

It gives us greater opportunities: better lifestyle; better health; better jobs and income as well as a more enlightened -- and here's hoping -- more democratic society.

Education empowers people – especially those from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds – and I acknowledge the explicit focus of this institution to “broaden access and opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds”.

I salute your global engagement and focus: your recognition of the role of education and innovation in this global village.

As Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls, I saw the best and worst of humanity: from abject poverty, conflict, abuse and violence, through to organisations and individuals making a difference, changing hearts and minds and saving lives.

I saw how education was one of the best ways to change lives and futures.

One of the greatest global challenges is achieving full and equal access to education, especially for girls. It's one of the best ways to change lives.

Around the world, more than 57 million girls are out of school.

A girl in South Sudan is three times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than to finish primary school.

*Yet, an extra year of education beyond the average boosts girls' eventual wages by 10–20 per cent.*

*An extra year of a mother's schooling cuts infant mortality by 15-25 per cent, and*

*And, if all girls had a primary education, there would be 14% fewer child marriages.*

Little wonder the United Nations describes educating girls the closest thing to a 'silver bullet in human development'.

The UN also reminds us that 'quality education is the foundation to creating sustainable development', that access to inclusive education equips us 'to develop innovative solutions to the world's greatest problems'. Innovation and problem solving, a mantra of this University.

You're all familiar with one of the world's greatest proponents of education access: Malala Yousafzai (few graduation addresses get away without a Malala reference these days!) She's a powerful leader, passionate speaker, Nobel Prize winner and symbol of the struggle of girls around the world to realise their rights.

Malala says "It is a book and a pen that can change the life of a child", and she is right.

We are so fortunate to have that advantage, that opportunity. We're lucky to live in a developed nation like Australia, especially when it comes to education access.

That doesn't mean the sector doesn't face challenges. We need to ensure diversity and difference are reflected and represented at all education levels; that women and girls are represented in STEM; that our hallowed institutions don't pose barriers to entry for those from under-represented backgrounds; we need to make sure our universities are at the forefront of symbolic and substantial and meaningful reconciliation of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. And always, that academia is about the search for truth and not only the search for funds.

I had the strange honour to giving the speech at my own graduation as President of my alma mater, the University of Adelaide in 1991 -- the year this university was founded in its current form -- (I felt a bit sorry for my fellow graduands as they might have been expecting someone a little grander for their milestone moment). But today, Chancellor, I feel a bit like my life has come full circle. My university education equipped me to serve my community and to play a leadership role, in some small way.

I know one of the aims of UniSA is to enhance leadership capabilities. I see it in your work every day. Leadership is a mindset: that you and your actions, can make a difference.

I encourage you to seize every opportunity to seek information, to speak up, to be a leader. My message is that, more than ever, our community needs you to be engaged in leadership and decision-making.

Real and lasting improvements to our world require us all to be leaders – within our families, with friends, in workplaces and our communities.

I wish you the best of luck for your future. Thank you for this honor. All power to you!