

“The Reciprocal Gifts of Education:  
Our Hope for the Future”

University of Queensland Conferral Ceremony

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

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1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chancellor, Sir Llew Edwards; Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor Trevor Grigg; members of the Senate, Senator Wensley, a friend from my student days here, members of faculty, distinguished guests, graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

As a graduate of the University of Queensland, I mark this day as one of the moments of greatest distinction in my life, and I am deeply grateful for the honor the university has bestowed upon me.

My late wife Andrea and I attended a ceremony very much like this in Mayne Hall when we graduated in May of 1975, and I never imagined I would ever attend another one, especially in this capacity.

I would like to thank some of my family and friends who have honored me by their presence here today.

I am delighted my mother Joyce McRobbie could be here today, for it is to her I owe my love of learning, and love of all the great arts of civilization.

I am also very pleased that my aunt Rosemary Campbell and sister Pamela Cafarella, also a University of Queensland alumna, could be here.

And I would like to acknowledge my friends of more than 30 years from when we were all students at the University of Queensland together— Jim Nolan, Kim Bannikoff, Alan Knight, and Gwynne Bentley. And my friends from my ANU days— ANU Pro Vice Chancellor Robin Stanton and Kate Gilbert. Also, Helen and Ian Harris, who now work for the University of Queensland.

And finally I want to acknowledge, with profound gratitude, the love and support of my wife Laurie.

## 2. MY EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

I am immensely grateful for the excellent education I received at the University of Queensland. Though I did not realize it at the time, I effectively received a broad liberal education of the kind most eloquently described and defended in its modern form by John Henry, Cardinal Newman in his great work The Idea of a University.

The great tradition of liberal education that Cardinal Newman described over a century ago asserts that a university education should comprise an education in the breadth of human knowledge, from the sciences to the humanities, from the social sciences to the arts, and instruction in the skills of both analysis and discrimination. This is a training, as Newman says, that develops “habits of mind which last through life.”

These habits of mind that I learned at the University of Queensland have stayed with me throughout my life, and what modest success I have had I attribute in no small part to them.

But a great education depends on great faculty, and I was lucky enough, while here, to have been the student of three remarkable faculty members – sadly now all dead, but living on in many of our memories.

So Chancellor, I hope you will forgive me if I briefly acknowledge them and so for a fleeting moment conjure up those memories for people here today who knew them.

From Richard Staveley I learned political philosophy and history and a profound respect for the Western intellectual heritage. In an age of obscurantism and cynicism, he was a beacon of rigor, reason, and intellectual courage who was able to lift a student's perspective beyond their time to the eternal questions that preside over the human race.

From Don Mannison I learned philosophy, aesthetics, and history. He was extraordinarily analytical, and no statement in any realm of life escaped his penetrating mind. I learned from him that matters of taste, especially in the arts, were not merely matters of judgment but could be rationally defended.

And from Malcolm Rennie, with whom I studied here briefly before he moved to ANU, I learned logic and mathematics, which ultimately led to my career in logic and computer science. He had a passion for the abstract that turned what—to some—was dry and remote, into a world both exciting and vibrant, while conveying its depth and profundity.

All three were men of the utmost intellectual seriousness and integrity in their disciplines. Their seriousness and integrity did not end in the classroom but pervaded all they did. You could not help but deeply respect them, and they were profoundly influential on me as an undergraduate.

I am sure that those of you graduating today could add many names to this list of teachers who have greatly influenced your lives and thoughts. The “habits of mind,” in Newman’s words, that you learned from them, will stay with you for life as they did with me.

From them I first understood what Plato meant in the Republic when he described the elements of a great education where “a spark may suddenly leap, as it were, from mind to mind, and the light of understanding, so kindled, will feed itself.”

### 3. INTRODUCTION: A POWERFUL EDUCATION FOUNDATION

These three faculty members, my mother, and so many other people in my life have given me the gift of education that I continue to cherish.

This is the gift we are celebrating today— the gift I received from the University of Queensland and the gift that all of you who are graduating have also received.

In one of the most famous treatises on education, Jean-Jacques Rousseau explained, “All that we lack at birth, all that we need when we come to man’s estate, is the gift of education.”

It is a gift not always recognized in the impatience and exuberance of youth, but it is a gift without which we would be immeasurably poorer.

The gift of education has prepared you for careers whether it be as physical scientists, engineers, information technologists, designers, or architects. It has given you an indispensable education in the breadth of knowledge, so you are prepared for further study, and have the flexible habits of mind that will enable you to tackle problems of complexity and subtlety whether at work or in any other realm of life.

Many of you will rise to be leaders of your communities, your professions, and even this country. And many of the close friends you have made while here will remain your steadfast friends for life, as have been many of the friends I made here.

You should revel in your accomplishments – it takes hard work, ability and application to graduate from a great university like the University of Queensland. Your families, too, can take great pride in your accomplishments, as many of them have sacrificed much to help you achieve this day.

#### 4. EDUCATION: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The gift of education is inspired by hope for the future. As Sir Alfred North Whitehead once said, “the task of a university is the creation of the future.” Together, professor and student look beyond what is to imagine what can be. Both are compelled by the belief that all of us can be better people and that together we can make the world a better place.

I arrived here yesterday after a week visiting universities in China. Once again the immense power of education was brought home to me in its starkest form. What has happened in China is remarkable. To have gone from the paralysis and stultification of the Cultural Revolution to the prosperous dynamic society that is modern China in just 30 years is a transformation possibly without parallel in human history.

And the key to it was education.

Deng Xiao Ping, who was responsible more than any one else for this extraordinary transformation, understood this clearly when he said in 1985, “Our national strength and sustained economic development depend more and more on the educational qualifications of the people.”

## 5. THE STENGTH OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

I have described your education as a gift. But those who receive gifts have an obligation to return those gifts in kind. You have received a gift from the University of Queensland. I would strongly encourage all of you to return this gift by staying involved, as much as you can, in the life of this university.

This is not a simple appeal for charity.

Rather it is based on an understanding of the American system of higher education borne of having worked in it in leadership positions for a decade and then having become President of one of America's finest universities.

Most global university rankings confirm the American system of higher education as the strongest in the world. But why is this? As an outsider to that system, but one who now knows it intimately, I believe I can see the reasons for this with particular clarity.

In essence, it is because American universities have, over the decades, been able to diversify their risk. Just as it is a rule of prudent investing to diversify investments to protect them against risk, so American universities protect themselves against risk by diversifying the sources of their funding.

Of the \$2.6 billion budget of Indiana University, roughly a quarter comes from tuition, a quarter from appropriations from the State of Indiana, a quarter from the Federal Government mainly from the large research funding agencies, and a quarter from philanthropic contributions from our alumni.

This kind of diversification broadly protects us against financial downturns in any one of these areas, against political vicissitudes in funding policies and philosophies. On the positive side, this diversification allows us to do things that would not be possible with one of these sources alone.

Highly engaged alumni are one of the enormous strengths of the American university system. IU has 80,000 members in our alumni association. Our endowment, which is all contributed by alumni, is approaching \$2 billion.

Engagement with and support for their alma mater, then, is the key way in which graduates can repay the gift of education. It has proven to be essential to the strength of American higher education, and hence of the American economy. It can also, with the support of graduates like you, become a growing part of the strength of Australian higher education, as I know it already is, and hence of the Australian nation.

As I understand it, education was a significant issue in the recent election campaign. It will be interesting to see whether the new government in its desire to improve the higher education system in Australia returns to older policies or looks forward to newer policies that strengthen diversification of the funding sources of the universities.

By giving back you will recognize that the many gifts of education enrich the lives not only of those who receive but also of those who give. They are gifts that reflect a profound sense of hope for our future: the hope that our children will have better lives; the hope that we can make a difference.

## 6. CONCLUSION: CLIMBING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

As you move towards your future, think of this day not as an end but a point of departure from which you will travel towards your next achievement.

This is a moment filled with hope and possibility.

To borrow from Winston Churchill, "Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending,

ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb.”

As you continue this climb, you will no doubt draw upon the many gifts of education that you have received from the University of Queensland. May you become a giver of those gifts as well.

Let yours be a legacy of hope, optimism, and belief in our shared future.

You are the promise of tomorrow. Thank you.