

'Celebrating a Passion for Learning'

Town and Gown Dinner

Tuesday 19 June 2007

Not long ago a former student of mine came to have lunch with me. I had supervised his Honours thesis in History before he finished his Law degree. He was making a visit to Melbourne from London, where he has been practising Law for six years. As we walked across the south lawn towards the Old Quadrangle and the Old Arts Building, he turned to me and said, 'You know, Peter, I can't tell you how moved I feel to be here among these memories; those were the happiest years of my life so far'.

My aspiration is that every student should feel as strongly as Matthew, that our university is a great place to be, a stimulating and caring community bound together by a passion for learning.

We want an outstanding, distinctive 'Melbourne Experience' for our undergraduate and postgraduate students. The Melbourne Model gives us our best opportunity to realise that vision. It is based on an undergraduate education offering discipline breadth as well as depth as the foundation for employment or graduate education in a professional or research field. We believe that this is the educational model which will provide our students with the opportunity to be effective citizens and have satisfying careers in the twenty-first century. So we need to deliver academic programs which provide an international as well as an Australian perspective, and in which research and knowledge transfer are embedded in the curriculum.

We have an ideal of an educationally focussed campus community, where staff and students work together to strengthen teaching, learning and the pursuit of knowledge. But we face formidable challenges to our ideal in a changing world of part-time work for most students, the digital revolution, the political environment, and continued growth in the size and diversity of the student body and of the campus itself.

We need to redefine what the Melbourne Experience should be. During last year's orientation week I heard a student exclaim into her mobile phone: "This is so good: there's nowhere else I'd rather be!" We need to ask what it is about the campus which will make it a place where all students will choose to be.

This is therefore a challenge about what goes on outside the classroom as well as inside it, and it is in part about student electronic interaction with university administration, learning resources and each other. The new technologies also give staff an advanced capacity to introduce students to the excitement of research. This will also require more flexible teaching spaces of the type that Peter Jamieson and Peter Tregloan were showing us during drinks.

Above all, however, the nourishment of the passion for learning is about the quality of student interaction with other students and with captivating teachers like Charles Schencking, Marilyns Guillemin and Lynn Gillam. It is teachers like them who implicitly convey to students the liberating invitation to join them in the excitement of wanting to know more.

Researchers often speak of that delicious moment of original insight, but there is an equivalent for teachers in the encounter between a passion for teaching and a passion for learning. A fortnight ago I spoke to a large group of secondary school students about the Melbourne Model and its educational objectives. Afterwards I had one of those moments of pure delight which will resonate with my colleagues here. A school student sidled up to me. She was well into a book of mine about the French Revolution. "I have to come to the University", she insisted, "I just want to know more and more about all that."

We are privileged at the University of Melbourne to have the responsibility of teaching and learning with gifted students. Occasionally - as with many of our doctoral students - it is they who have been the teachers. The shared passion for knowledge - researchers who want to inspire their students,

students who want to learn – is the best thing about being in the University of Melbourne community.

In 2005 Harold Shapiro, former President of the University of Michigan, then of Princeton University, described the core purpose of a university education as, in his words:

The need to prepare all thoughtful citizens for an independent and responsible life of choice that appreciates the connectedness of things and peoples and the great uncertainty that clouds our prospects. Such citizens are able to distinguish between logical and illogical arguments, to understand the implications of the diversity we honour, and to make moral and political choices that give their individual and joint lives greater meaning. (*A Larger Sense of Purpose*, Page 98)

In Australia we are suspicious of the idea that universities should be places where explicit attention is paid to values – what the Americans call a ‘moral education’. Secondary schools obviously cannot and should not avoid such an education, but nor should universities. What does a moral education mean for us? It means that our academic programs should be imbued with the ethos and experience of research. We want our graduates to have a profound respect for truth and intellectual integrity, for the ethics of research. We want the University to be a principled community, where explicit codes of academic honesty, of integrity and of good conduct guide behaviour and where students and staff accept their obligations to others.

Through being in such a place, we want our graduates to be educated, well-informed citizens able to contribute to their communities wherever they choose to live and work, people who respect diversity, the physical environment and individual human rights and dignity. This should be an education in citizenship of the type exemplified by one of our students who spoke earlier, Dylan Barber.

So we want this to be a place where the most able students from Australia and overseas come because they believe that it is here that they will have the finest education – and because they will have a campus experience that they look back on with delight as some of the glowing years of their lives. We want the best and the brightest, regardless of their financial or social circumstances.

That's why we are excited about our new Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars Program. All Victorian secondary school principals have been asked to nominate up to five students who demonstrate significant academic and leadership potential – the aim is to have at least one Kwong Lee Dow Scholar from every secondary school in the state. In three weeks time the first group of 700 students will come to Parkville for a program of activities, including the chance to meet the students we heard from earlier this evening, Dylan Barber and Wenona Lok, and to hear from speakers like Rai Gaita, whose memoir *Romulus my Father* is being read by VCE students this year. Among many other benefits, those Kwong Lee Dow Scholars who come to Melbourne will receive a scholarship to support a period of study overseas as part of their undergraduate course.

But we have so much more to do. One in five final-year international students surveyed last year reported that socialising with Australian students had been a problem initially, but was not so any longer; however, two in five said it was still a problem. Plainly, if our goal is to provide a learning experience that is international in every way, we still have much to do. It is great to hear our other student presenter Wenona Lok talking of that challenge. We must seek to create both an intellectual and a social experience that all of our students will recall as fondly as the American exchange student who wrote to me after her semester here in 2005. I quote Lisbeth: 'I truly had a fantastic semester at the Uni of Melbourne. The university was friendly, helpful, fun and most of all had an open and intellectual atmosphere! I will spread all of my wonderful memories.'

Public policy issues about education – such as the appropriate governance and levels of funding of universities – are at least on the agenda in this election year. That’s refreshing. But let us not forget why this debate matters. As Glyn Davis observed as he concluded his National Press Club address a fortnight ago, what really matters beneath the froth of arguments about higher education policy is the funding and policy platform for what he called “the fundamental joy of learning and teaching, of ideas and research”. That is why we are here.

And that is why the University is currently undertaking an integrated set of changes to our internal structures, administration and student services. This is whole-of-institution change, the most extensive in 150 years. It is being undertaken for one overriding reason: the desire to create an academic and campus experience for our students which is fresh, contemporary, stimulating and excellent.

To our friends from the Town: I thank Gail Davidson for speaking so beautifully on your behalf. I acknowledge our own staff and students here this evening for the shared privilege of learning together. To all of us: let’s celebrate what it is to be an open, enquiring, passionate community. I ask my colleagues of the Gown to stand with me and toast our Town.