

## 2017 CHASS Australia Prizes Dinner Speech

Thank you for the opportunity to be here tonight.

And thanks Joe for the generous introduction.

It's more than I deserve. And to tell you the truth, it's more than I'm used to.

On the day that my retirement from Macquarie University was announced, I was walking across campus when a well-known science professor rushed over to me.

"I have just heard the news of your retirement," she said, "this is terrible, I'm so upset".

"Don't worry", I replied. "The Council will search far and wide, and I am sure they will find a terrific person to be the next vice chancellor".

"Oh sure," she replied, "that's what they said last time".

I wasn't hurt.

After 16 years as a vice chancellor, I was used to the ways of academics.

I just adopted the benign face of the Buddha and continued my walk.

Soon I came to a map designed to help people navigate their way around campus.

And I noticed that it had some graffiti on it.

Under the orientation arrow, the one that says, "You are here", someone had added, "but why?"

Not a bad question. Why are we here?

It's always worth thinking about your purpose.

And that is what I would like to talk about tonight.

What, exactly, is the purpose of the arts, humanities, and social sciences?

My search for an answer to this question begins in an unlikely place, London's Gatwick airport.

A 59-year-old woman named Julie Lloyd was returning to Canada after a visit to England.

With her greying hair and warm smile, she looked like a kindly grandmother.

But looks, as they say, can be deceiving.

To the ever-alert security staff at London's Gatwick airport, Julie was a potential terrorist who brazenly tried to smuggle a gun aboard a flight from London to Toronto.

Perhaps “smuggle” is too strong a word.

Julie didn't try to conceal the weapon; it was in the handbag that she submitted for airport scanning.

“Gun” is also not entirely accurate.

The item in question was 6-cm long, and it was attached to the hands of a small plastic soldier.

Julie had purchased the toy soldier for her husband, a former army signaller, but the Gatwick security staff would not let her carry it on board.

Julie protested strenuously.

“The ‘gun’, she said, is made of resin, it has no moving parts.

There's no hole in the barrel; there isn't even a trigger”.

Of course, the security staff could see this for themselves.

Nevertheless, they insisted that the tiny toy was a prohibited “firearm” and they prevented Julie from carrying it aboard the plane.

When Julie arrived in Toronto, she complained to her friends back in England.

They took the story to the tabloid *Daily Mail* newspaper (the largest circulation newspaper in the UK).

The editor sent a journalist to interview the head of security at Gatwick Airport.

He agreed that the story sounds “incredibly stupid”, but he explained that “rules are rules and we must obey”.

I had my own encounter with the “rules are rules” argument when my wife and I visited the Sydney office of Medibank Private after an extended stay abroad.

We explained that we had been living overseas for some years, but had now returned home and wanted to re-activate our health insurance.

“No problem”, said the person behind the desk.

“All I need is proof that you have returned to Australia”.

Mmmmm...

I was not sure how to respond. I decided to try logical inference from first principles.

“Well”, I said, “this office is in Sydney, Sydney is in Australia, and we're sitting here right in front of you.

Does this not provide sufficient evidence for you to infer that we are indeed in Australia?”

"Not really," she said, "I need documentary proof".

I offered to let her pinch me, but the lady was not for turning.

Until she saw arrival stamps in our passports (something Australian immigration hasn't done for years), or boarding passes, or luggage tags, there would be no health insurance for us.

It's true that Julie's story and our encounter with the insurance bureaucracy are only minor irritants, risible tales that cause little real harm.

But this is not always the case.

Sometimes, rule following can lead to serious consequences.

A few years ago a teenage boy on a hike became lost in the remote bush outside of Sydney.

Exhausted and dehydrated, he was still able to ring the emergency number using his mobile phone.

The boy pleaded with the operator to send someone to rescue him.

Alas, the service rules specified a particular requirement; the caller had to provide an address or at least the name of the nearest cross street.

The boy was in the bush, in the Blue Mountains, well off the beaten track.

There were no cross streets; in fact, there were no streets of any kind.

But the operator was adamant — no street, no help.

He rang back, but help had been delayed.

By the time the boy was found, it was too late.

He was dead.

The boy may have died anyway, but hidebound adherence to a rule turned a dangerous situation into a deadly one.

At the subsequent inquest, the emergency services manager agreed that the operators seemed "fixated" on obtaining a street address.

But the manager defended them because they were only doing what they were *trained* to do.

The manager may not have realised it, but he had put his finger on one of the oldest controversies in philosophy — the difference between training and education, between acquiring knowledge and becoming wise.

The airport security staff who refused to distinguish a toy gun from a real one, the health insurance clerk who wouldn't accept our corporeal presence as evidence that my wife

and I were in Australia, and the emergency call centre operators who asked a boy lost in the bush for a street address had *all* been carefully trained.

They knew the protocols, they understood the systems, and they stuck to the rules.

But, it is not enough to train people to follow a set of rules.

Real-world problems are rarely cut and dry; they are often ambiguous, vague and ill defined.

They are not always covered in training because it's impossible to anticipate every contingency.

A wise person knows how to improvise and when to make an *exception* to the rules.

Unfortunately, wisdom has an image problem.

As far as the popular media are concerned, wisdom is the province of ghost whisperers, extraterrestrials — think Mr. Spock the Vulcan — and wizened kung-fu sages ("The body is the arrow, the spirit is the bow, Grasshopper").

Wise people are not only portrayed as old, alien and weird but also bookish, risk-averse, and unemotional.

No wonder their pearls of wisdom are routinely ignored by the impetuous young.

Youth thirsts for new experiences; it's in the nature of young people to take chances and follow their hearts.

Wisdom, it just gets in the way.

"Fools rush in where wise men never go", crooned Elvis, "But wise men never fall in love, so how are they to know?"

You might think that universities would hold a different view; after all, they are in the wisdom business.

You might think this, but you would be wrong.

University courses cover every conceivable area of knowledge — massage therapy, homeopathy, circus performing — but "wisdom" is rarely mentioned.

Distressed by the disappearance of wisdom from the curriculum, academics have responded in their usual way — by writing books.

In the last few years, they have published a plethora of worthy tomes, each lamenting the decline of higher education.

There are now so many such books that the decline of academia has become a literary genre all its own, like cookery, romance, or crime books.

Amazon will probably offer an end-of-the-university-as-we-know-it box set for Christmas— no doubt available as ebooks.

The authors of these books are almost all from the humanities, arts, and social sciences – the HASS subjects.

They chart the symptoms of decay.

More and more vocational courses; fewer and fewer HASS courses; and generations of students leaving university no wiser than the day they entered.

The *leitmotif* of these books is money.

The authors argue that the impetus to make money has elevated subjects that have immediate financial returns (such as commerce for example) over less bankable subjects such as the humanities and social sciences.

Education, of course, wasn't *always* about money.

From its ancient origins until fairly recently, academics defined their mission in *moral* terms.

Following Plato, they believed that education makes good people, and good people act nobly.

In the last century, however, the decline in religion, and the widespread acceptance of moral relativism, forced universities to abandon their traditional aims.

Having lost their time-honoured purpose, universities looked for a replacement.

Not surprisingly, the one they found reflects the primary concern of modern society — *money*.

That is why vice chancellors employ consultants to produce reports showing how much their institutions contribute to the national accounts.

They put so much emphasis on their financial benefits that our politicians have come to believe that universities exist for no other reason.

The result is that we are now firmly in the age of money in which the value of higher education is measured by how much money graduates earn for themselves and the country.

HASS subjects -- which focus on self-understanding -- are marginalised in favour of disciplines that can be easily translated into cash.

HASS supporters defend themselves by arguing that *their* subjects make money too.

Take Shakespeare, for example.

The Bard is the epitome of a "creative industry".

Tourists *flock* to Stratford-upon-Avon spending their money in the local hotels, bars, and souvenir shops.

Large audiences are attracted to Shakespeare's plays.

Copies of his sonnets continue to bring in millions, and even the wine sold during the interval at the Globe theatre earns ton of money

All true. There's only one problem.

Shakespeare's *real* value has nothing to do with any of this.

I know it has been said before, but it bears repeating, we seem to know the *price* of everything and the *value* of nothing.

Don't get me wrong. I am not against getting rich.

As screen siren Mae West once said: "I've been rich and I've been poor and, believe me baby, rich is better."

As a former vice chancellor, I know as well as anyone that money is the means by which universities achieve their mission.

But surely the first step is to actually have a mission.

By focusing on money, universities have become institutions with means but no ends.

What should the mission of a university be?

In her book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*,<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum argues that the mission of a university is, or at least should be, to prepare students for democratic citizenship.

Democracy makes severe demands on its citizens.

Rather than simply defer to authority, citizens in a democracy need to know how to analyse and weigh evidence for themselves.

Before they can decide how to vote in an election, or a plebiscite or when they serve on a jury, citizens must be able to reflect on the relevant issues.

The must also learn how to debate their ideas with others.

If done correctly — using logic and relying on evidence — the opportunity to argue and debate enhances mutual respect and understanding.

We learn that those who hold different views from ours are not necessarily evil or stupid.

Indeed, Nussbaum considers developing empathy to be one of the *most* important goals of education.

Empathy requires seeing the world through other peoples' eyes, envisaging distant times and remote places and developing the frame of mind that allows us to feel in touch with "lives at a distance".

In other words, empathy is what we learn from the humanities, arts and social sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum (2010). *Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

By aiming for job skills rather than empathy, Nussbaum believes that higher education has become trivialized.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with vocational training; a fulfilling career is an important part of a good life.

But, while we are teaching students the state of their particular arts, we must also be concerned with the state of their hearts.

To paraphrase John Ruskin, the highest reward for a university education is not how much graduates get paid for it, but what kind of people they become by it.

And that is why HASS subjects are so valuable.

The arts and humanities are concerned with what it means to be human: the, ideas, stories, art works and myths that help us to understand our lives and the world we live in.

The social sciences seek to interpret the behaviour of individuals and groups.

Together the humanities, arts and social sciences help us to understand our selves, our society, and our place in the world.

They are essential to *any* education.

I'm not claiming that studying psychology, literature, or any other HASS subject would help surgeons remove a diseased prostate.

But it might deepen their empathy and improve their understanding of what constitutes a high-quality life.

Such empathy could help them to decide whether they should remove a prostate in the first place.

And it's not just doctors who could benefit from a HASS education.

Attending plays would not have helped financiers devise the complicated financial derivatives that plunged the world into financial crisis, *but* if they were familiar with *Faust*, they might have thought twice about the consequences of their actions.

Being able to quote Shelley will not help politicians get elected (certainly not in Australia) but studying *Ozymandias* might make them more humble and thoughtful about their accomplishments.

In *Choruses from The Rock*, T. S. Eliot asks:

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

Knowledge and information are not enough.

The security guards at Gatwick, the health insurance agent in Sydney and the emergency operators who insisted on having a street name before they could respond all knew the required procedure.

They probably also had the moral will to do the right thing.

What they lacked was moral skill — they lacked wisdom.

Without wisdom, knowledge and information are useless, perhaps even dangerous.

We need HASS more than ever.

Mahatma Gandhi knew this.

He warned us to be on guard against science without humanity, politics without principle, knowledge without character, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, and worship without sacrifice.

Thanks to all of the HASS scholars and practitioners who are here tonight.

You are all heeding Gandhi's warning.

A special thanks to the nominees for the CHASS Australian prizes.

Some of you have been working in the field for many years and we have benefitted from your dedication.

Some of you have been working in HASS for a short time, but you have already made your voice heard.

And some of you are just beginning your career, and have impressed the judges with your potential.

Tonight, we celebrate the excellent work of our nominees and the generosity of the prize donors.

Tonight, we also celebrate CHASS, which has advocated for the arts, humanities and social sciences for many years.

And tonight we celebrate the fact that Australia is a better place because of your work.

*So please charge your glasses and join me as we toast,  
to the humanities, arts and social sciences.*

Congratulations to prize nominees and winners and thanks to the donors and the organizers.