

## **Menzies Oration on Higher Education 2016**

**Delivered by Baroness Valerie Amos CH**

at the University of Melbourne, 14 September 2016

**Title: Preparing global citizens and protecting freedom of speech:  
the role of universities**

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests. It is a great privilege to deliver this year's Menzies Oration on Higher Education at the University of Melbourne.

Sir Robert Menzies was a firm believer in the transformative power of education and access to opportunity. He recognised early on that removing socio-economic barriers to education was critical. And the Menzies Foundation continue to play a critical role in that regard. This is an issue that is very important to me. Indeed my sister and I set up a charity in London, in memory of our parents who were passionate about education, focused on supporting young men of African Caribbean heritage to realise their ambitions by not only getting in to, but also finishing their studies at university. Research has shown that in the United Kingdom this is the group with the poorest retention rates. My

father always said that 'education was not a guarantee of great wealth or riches but it was the guarantee against abject poverty'.

So as tonight we celebrate a new generation of scholars it is right that we remember Sir Robert's legacy – and what he made possible not only in Australian higher education, but across the world.

I have always been an internationalist. It's in my DNA. The way I was brought up. Coming from a small country, Guyana, to a larger country can do that to you. It's the experience of being a migrant. But I think it's more than that. Being part of a colonial history we were taught to challenge conventional wisdom. To question. And my parents goal in moving from Guyana to Britain was to get access to the best possible higher educational opportunities for their children. Given that we were 9, 6 and 3 at the time you could say they were pretty forward looking.

So for me higher education institutions and what they stand for have a significant impact on the development of societies because they provide a space for critical engagement, for debate and discussion of contentious issues and are places of learning and unlearning.

Universities open up opportunities for creativity, innovation and the pursuit of knowledge. And where they do their job really well, they help

students to learn to listen, to understand another point of view, to respectfully disagree rather than dismiss and ignore.

Tonight I want to explore some of the dilemmas that face us in higher education today, particularly in the UK but not exclusively so and explore some of my concerns about the ways in which the expansion in higher education globally has, in some places reinforced rather removed inequality. The way in which the easy availability of mass information, has sometimes led to a superficial rather than in depth acquisition of knowledge and the way in which social media can reinforce rather than challenge prejudice.

The dramatic changes in the higher education landscape globally, increased competition and marketisation and the student as customer or consumer has begun to erode the core value of higher education as a social good. In the last 10 years we have seen a major global expansion in opportunity in higher education.

It is estimated that higher education enrolments globally will increase from 100 million in 2000 to 260 million in 2025.<sup>1</sup> But that rise masks significant differences between countries and regions.

Here in Australia, in 2015, more than 1.4m home and international students enrolled in higher education in Australia compared to some 950,000 in 2005.

The UK too has seen significant growth. In the last 15 years the number of people attending university has increased by more than 300,000, more than half of them undergraduate students.<sup>2</sup>

In India, government HE expansion plans mean that India needs another 800 universities and more than 40,000 colleges in the next eight years to provide the planned additional 14 million places. If this is realised that means 40 million places by 2020.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of Commonwealth Universities: High education: what role can the Commonwealth play (see pdf)

<sup>2</sup> HESA: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>

<sup>3</sup> British Council: Understanding India: The future of higher education and opportunities for international cooperation: [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/understanding\\_india\\_report.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/understanding_india_report.pdf)

In 2010, the Chinese ministry of education set out plans to attract 500,000 students by 2020.<sup>4</sup>

But on the African continent the story is different. The enrolment rate in the region is around seven per cent compared to 29 per cent worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

Brain drain, low course quality, inadequate governance structures, financial constraints and a growing demand for higher education to contribute more consistently to national development all present challenges for higher education in sub Saharan Africa.<sup>6</sup>

And students globally are also on the move, seizing opportunities to study abroad when possible. But not everyone is able to take advantage of this expansion even with new and innovative ways of teaching and learning made possible by technological developments which have improved the quality and availability of distance learning and the use of

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<sup>4</sup> How China plans to become a global force in higher education: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/oct/12/how-china-plans-to-become-a-global-force-in-higher-education>

<sup>5</sup> British Council: [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/graduate\\_employability\\_in\\_ssa\\_final-web.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/graduate_employability_in_ssa_final-web.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO's work in supporting African countries in the process of improving the quality and relevance of higher education: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/dakar/education/higher-education/>

MOOC's and app based learning.

In post-apartheid South Africa, for example, there are almost a million students attending public universities. A vast improvement compared to the half a million in 1994 when Nelson Mandela became President. But participation rates for black South African and white South African students vary dramatically. In 2013, the number of black South African students in public higher education stood at 16%. This compared to nearly 55% white South African students. This with a difference in population of those aged between 20 and 24 standing at 4.1 million black South Africans and 315,000 white South Africans.<sup>7</sup> South Africa is clearly still dogged by its apartheid past and a generation of pupils denied a quality education. And that deep, structural and deliberate discrimination continues to take its toll.

Major barriers worldwide to equality of access to and participation in higher education persist, ranging from poverty, inequality, social class, gender and culture. And even when students overcome those hurdles other barriers can stand in their way. Do they come from homes with a

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<sup>7</sup> Council on Higher Education South Africa: 2013 Higher Education Data on Participation: [http://www.che.ac.za/focus\\_areas/higher\\_education\\_data/2013/participation#race](http://www.che.ac.za/focus_areas/higher_education_data/2013/participation#race)

culture of learning, with books readily available? Do they have the networks to arrange internships and work experience? And what do their parents think? Is education seen as a right or a luxury that can't be afforded? In many countries parents cannot even afford to send their children to school. So higher education becomes an unattainable goal.

Most countries with mature systems of higher education have a participation rate for schoolleavers of around 50% or more. In Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa the average is 37.5%. On the African continent it is around 6%. Global inequality remains a significant factor in determining who gets to university and whether they remain there.<sup>8</sup>

In the UK the substantial shift in the method of funding higher education also appears to have widened rather than narrowed the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged despite efforts to widen participation and access. Earlier this year, it was reported that the number of disadvantaged students attending the UK's leading universities had

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<sup>8</sup> South African Higher Education Reviewed:  
[http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE\\_South%20African%20higher%20education%20reviewed%20-%20electronic.pdf](http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/CHE_South%20African%20higher%20education%20reviewed%20-%20electronic.pdf)

shown little increase and in some cases fallen despite the expansion. The Russell Group represents 24 of Britain's leading universities. That report that the number of students in their universities coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds increased from 19.5 per cent in 2004/5 to 20.8 in 2014/5, but other universities saw the overall proportion of their students increase from 32.5 per cent to 37.5 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

These changes in the UK domestic and global education landscape are mirrored by other changes which are also having an impact on what we think universities are for. For example, the democratization of opinion through social media has, for the first time, given young people a platform to directly voice their concerns and views. And it has had positive and negative effects. In Egypt activists used Facebook and Twitter to join the movement which saw the three-decade-long presidency of Hosni Mubarak come to an end. There are a fora for information sharing and debate across continents, sites for fundraising, for engagement in social or humanitarian activity. But there are also examples of social media networks narrowing perspectives, encouraging young people to interact only with those who share their views. Limiting

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<sup>9</sup> HESA data – reported in the Independent, 18 Feb 2016:  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/number-of-poor-students-attending-uks-leading-universities-falls-despite-millions-spent-to-encourage-a6879771.html>

the ability to engage, disagree, reflect and change opinion. So even as there is greater connectivity across class, cultural, religious, ethnic and other divides there is also increasing fragmentation. More engagement with people who are 'like minded' reinforcing already strongly held views.

Nelson Mandela said and I quote: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” You will not be surprised to hear that I agree.

I am the Director of SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, where our students care deeply about the world and want to change it. I rather like that as when I was about 16 I thought the world would be a much better place if only I ran it. I have since learnt how hard it is! We are the only university in Europe specialising in the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. And we do that from the perspective of our regions. And that commitment to promoting understanding between cultures and regions, to connecting communities, has been there from the start.

I was amazed to discover that our first Director Sir Edward Denison Ross, a specialist in Persian literature, as well as a scholar of Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and various Turkic dialects, published a letter in The Times in 1929 to urge the BBC to stop offending Muslims and the Chinese. 86 years on we are still having to do similar things. Our

students are politically active and engaged from raising awareness about detention centres to visiting the Calais 'jungle' in France which houses refugees and launching a community project to crowdfund a Sylheti-language children's storybook. Sylheti is one of London's under-resourced community languages. Of course this kind of political activity is not limited to SOAS students. They are also passionate about the School's values and us 'walking the talk'.

They challenged us as a School to support the Boycott, Divest and Sanction agenda against Israel. And through that campaign have sought to limit who is free to speak at the School. When I met the Israeli Ambassador to the UK earlier this year to discuss the detention of a student at Ben Gurion airport there was protest. Neighbouring colleges in the University of London family have seen protests against speakers who are seen as having 'colluded' with the Government of Israel and who students thought should not have been given a platform. The conduct of some of the activism around BDS has created tensions with our Jewish students. And yet no contradiction is perceived when students criticise the School for being insufficiently critical of the Government's 'Prevent' legislation which places a statutory duty on Universities to prevent radicalisation and through that duty have sought to limit who can speak on university campuses. At SOAS we have been

robust in our engagement with Government and in our defence of free speech. The right to have speakers whose views we may abhor but who are not acting unlawfully. Free speech cannot be selectively applied. The conflation of individual political activism and perception of institutional responsibility can cloud judgement.

You will be aware of the student movement linked to the #rhodesmustfall campaign. Originally directed against the statue at the University of Cape Town, it rapidly moved to Oxford in the UK. Students took a strong view of their universities colonial past. Indeed at SOAS the 'decolonisation' of the university is a student priority. Guardian journalist Andrew Anthony, wrote:

“In one sense then, the campaign is an example of healthy argument and free speech in operation”

“But the campaign has also come to symbolise something else, a new intolerance of words and images that is sweeping across British and American university campuses, a zealous form of cultural policing that relies on accusatory rhetoric and a righteous desire to censor history,

literature, politics and culture.”<sup>10</sup>

I don't believe in censoring history. I believe that we must shed a spotlight on it and show how it informs current understanding and behaviour.

Where ever we might stand on the issue, academic freedom and freedom of speech must be protected and respected. But it must also be recognised that these rights are not absolute – these are rights that need to be exercised with due regard for others – with respect.

Our students today are tomorrow's leaders and given the challenges we face in our world-injustice, inequality, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, conflict, extremism – we need them to be active global citizens. We need them to think beyond borders. Our world is joined up. The biggest challenge I faced when I was at the United Nations was Syria. I was in charge of humanitarian affairs and in a four year period saw the crisis escalate. There are now around 6.5 million people internally displaced, an estimated 400,000 casualties and nearly

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<sup>10</sup> Is free speech in British universities under threat? Guardian, 24 January 2016:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/24/safe-spaces-universities-no-platform-free-speech-rhodes>

4.8m registered refugees.<sup>11</sup> It's a political crisis requiring strong global leadership. Universities too can play a role. Universities enable students to develop a critical global perspective on the world. Inspire them to be active global citizens depending on the engagement we require them to have with a wider world.

Our students need to appreciate that our world looks very different from different countries and continents. Duties and entitlements, for example, look very different if you are relatively poor from a country that was colonised rather than coming from a country which was an empire.

Citizenship and protection might be more about enough to eat and drink, basic healthcare, shelter and education rather than the opportunity to go on holiday or consume whatever you wish.

There are also degrees of democracy in different parts of the world which lead us to ask unsettling questions. Will a more authoritarian strong state tradition like we see in China and some other parts of Asia be compatible with a global citizenship that stresses rights more than duties and obligations - whether to family or community?

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<sup>11</sup> UNHCR data, last update 4 September 2016: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

The negotiation of what truly 'global' citizenship might look like will require give from the West as well as the East. From the North as well as the South. And those who most desperately need such citizenship, particularly with its rights to shelter are refugees - and nobody seems to want to help them. Their rights are being denied the world over.

The way in which the current refugee crisis is being debated, discussed and exploited including during the period in the run up to Britain's referendum on membership of the European Union shows the way in which narrow, domestic political interests are crowding out engagement with globalisation and the opportunity it represents. But globalisation also presents significant challenge in times of slow economic growth.

For those of us in Europe, in countries like the UK and France there are questions we can no longer run away from.

We must ask ourselves: what sort of society we want to be, one that is open and inclusive, or closed and inward-looking?" and "How do we

build plural societies which strengthen rather than threaten our diversity and multifaceted identities?”

Here at the University of Melbourne you pride yourselves on your ability to make a difference. It is something which unites our two institutions.

When I was at the United Nations, every day there were questions about the UN's credibility and legitimacy. And yes I saw paralysis. Political failure. But I also saw hope, tenacity and courage. I saw people supporting each other in difficult and almost unimaginable conditions. I saw humanitarian workers do everything possible to not only make changes on the ground but to be strong advocates for people in need. The world desperately needs evidence based policy making. A recognition of the context and backdrop against which crucial political decisions are being made. So we need to protect our role and raise our voice.

Universities are about the communal examination of ideas. And here I address today's graduates directly. As the next generation of intellectuals, while you have a duty to test and critique the boundaries of scholarship you also have a duty to ensure respect for others as these

boundaries are tested. The debate will only ever be as good as the space it is given. Argument and disagreement are all part of the course to finding solutions.

It is only through the interplay of constructive and engaged examination, that we can progress in our understanding and knowledge of the world. As leaders in higher education, the key sector of society which provides such space across the world, I feel we have a duty to preserve and protect free speech. It is a duty I hold dear.

In closing, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. And to wish you all the very best for your future.

Thank you.