

Citation for the Award of Doctor of Science (Honoris Causa) to Professor Margot Prior AO

Professor Margot Prior has made highly distinguished contributions to the scientific investigation of child psychology and the application of developmental research to clinical practice and social policy.

After graduating from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Music, Margot Prior played with orchestras across Australia and in Britain for over two decades before returning to university to study psychology. She rapidly acquired expertise as a researcher and clinician working with a wide variety of conditions of child development and in 1989 La Trobe University appointed her Professor of Clinical Psychology – the first woman in Australia to hold the position in this field. In this role she developed a close association with the Royal Children’s Hospital, which in 1994 appointed her as Inaugural Director of Psychology with a concomitant professorial appointment at the University of Melbourne.

In these roles Margot Prior’s leadership of research and clinical practice in child psychology has greatly influenced the reputation of the Parkville Children’s Campus. She has a reputation as an international leader in the field of child temperament and mental health and has made major contributions to the study of attention deficits and autism.

As a scientist, Margot Prior is best known as an architect of the Australian Temperament Project, a major longitudinal project, commenced in 1983, that has now followed its study cohorts over 16 waves of assessment ranging from early infancy through early adulthood. The study, one of very few that have examined three generations in a single project, has had a major impact on social policy and developmental science.

Margot Prior’s more than 200 scientific publications, 44 of them cited more than 100 times, include seminal work on child temperament, as well as sustained major work on autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, language development and dyslexia. The work has appeared in numerous top-flight journals in psychology, psychiatry, education and neuroscience.

She is Patron of Autism Victoria, Chair of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, and a member of numerous advisory committees and editorial boards. In addition to her Honorary Professorial Fellowship in the School of Psychological Sciences, she continues to contribute to academia as Adjunct Professor at La Trobe University and Research Associate at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. Among her many honours are Officer of the Order of Australia (2005), National Finalist, Senior Australian of the Year (2006), and Fellowships of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Australian Psychological Society.

Beyond her scholarly and academic work, Margot Prior has been a prominent voice for child welfare, peace and social justice initiatives. She chaired the Social and Human Sciences Network for UNESCO (2005-07), was a founding member of Psychologists for the Prevention of War (now Psychologists for Peace) and contributed to the establishment of the La Trobe Institute for Peace Research in 1985. She was a widely read newspaper columnist and media commentator for many years, her advice and opinions doing much to raise the level of public understanding about child development in Australia.

Professor Margot Prior is recommended for the award of Doctor of Science honoris causa for her distinguished contributions to scientific and clinical knowledge of developmental psychology, in particular the clarity she has brought to the age-old debate between nature and nurture.