

Occasional Address
Royal Exhibition Building, 11 December 2018, 11.00 am

Professor Louise Harms
Director, Trauma Recovery and Resilience Research Program
Department of Social Work

Opening doors to equity and diversity

This extraordinarily impressive building provides an appropriately grand-scale setting for us to celebrate the achievements of you, our graduands. And I congratulate you all on your successes.

This building first opened its doors back in 1880. It was in that very same year that *our* University first opened doors for women to enroll in undergraduate degrees - a quarter of a century after it had for men.

The resistance prior to women's enrolment in 1880 was fierce and blatant – according to sources, it was a time of 'dogged fighting', of 'indifference' and a time of 'untenable prejudices' (Blainey, 1957). Women's intellectual abilities and academic merit, their function in society, their very 'decency', were questioned as they pursued their right to a tertiary education.

Fast forward 138 years to today - those of you graduating from the Bachelor of Biomedicine are proof that much has changed, for two reasons:

Women's enrolment in 2016 into your now graduating cohort was a first time high - at 57%. This is at a time when there is national and international concern about the relatively low levels of female participation in the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine) from primary school onwards.

And we are incredibly proud that, again for the first time, the five highest achieving students identify as female. And of the top-ranked students, 37 in total, 59% identify as female.

These are history-making achievements. By way of both women's enrolment and excellence in this degree alone, there's compelling evidence of profound change since 1880.

However, we know that gender disparities persist. We still need this 57%+ female enrolment in our undergraduate student body to build and sustain women's later participation rates in STEM careers. The 'merit' question is still asked of many women pursuing careers in academia and industry, in our board rooms and governments. And in professions that are predominantly female, such as my own, we still need to address gaps in leadership and management opportunities, for example.

You, our graduands of all our degrees today, embody diversity much more than previous generations.

But in our universities and many other workplaces you will be stepping into, doors still need to be opened to that diversity and to equitable opportunities – not just in relation to a person’s gender, but Indigeneity, culture and ethnicity; sexual identities; physical ability and mental health.

And why keep opening these doors? It’s not just a matter of rights and social justice. Studies show that, for everyone, where there is gender equity and genuine inclusion in our workplaces, there is higher job satisfaction, improved decision-making, greater productivity, and most importantly, excellence in discovery and innovation – for everyone. When we get equity and diversity right, everyone benefits.

So, as a University and Faculty, we are looking closely at where and why our doors are still not wide open, and what else needs to be done.

And as you move into the next steps of your careers, we hope you will take up this individual and collective responsibility – the responsibility of promoting equity, diversity and excellence wherever you are.

References

Blainey, G. (1957). *A centenary history of the University of Melbourne*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

Vice-Chancellor’s Introduction

Chancellor,

This morning I am delighted to introduce our guest speaker Louise Harms.

Louise is Professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, and Director of its Trauma Recovery and Resilience Research Program.

Louise herself graduated from Melbourne with bachelor’s degrees in Arts and in Social Work, and later, a Masters and a PhD.

She also holds a Certificate in Trauma Counselling and Psychotherapy, from the Cairnmillar Institute.

Her career experience includes social work at the Victorian Rehabilitation Centre and in the Neurosurgery Unit at the Royal Children’s Hospital.

She has also worked as a counsellor in the University of Melbourne’s Counselling Service. Louise’s academic credentials feature a University award for Excellence in Engagement through Teaching, and her publications include the textbook ‘Working with People: Communication skills for reflective practice.’

It is a pleasure to call on her to speak today. Please welcome Professor Louise Harms.