

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

Professor Johanna Wyn

Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor, Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Chancellor, Graduands, parents and friends, and colleagues,

I am honoured to pay tribute to the achievements of our graduands. Every degree earned is a triumph of inspiration, perspiration and determination. Every degree is also a product of your faith in yourselves and the faith your families, friends and lecturers have placed in you.

Over many years of working with undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, it has been a huge privilege to be part of our students' achievement of their educational goals. Each person's educational journey is different, and it is often those who struggle the most who are the most inspirational.

Today I would like to share some observations as a researcher who has tracked the journeys of two generations of young Australians through their post-school years. I lead the Youth Research Centre's Life Patterns longitudinal research program that has followed school leavers in 1991 (yes, they are now in their forties) and school leavers in 2005 (who are now aged 28-29) in real time. These two cohorts correspond with the generations known as Gen X and Gen Y (or Millennials as they are sometimes called). The study has focused on education and work experiences and the ways that they influence and are influenced by wellbeing and relationships, and tonight I want to share just a few insights from this study that may be of interest to you.

We don't have a crystal ball to tell us what the future will be like, but do know that the environment in which we are learning, living and working is changing quite rapidly. Although we can't foretell the future, we can learn from the recent past. Young people are the first to engage with new developments, and in so doing, they shape their own and our futures. Longitudinal research about young people can tell us a lot about how they respond to new conditions – ones that previous generations have not experienced. For Gen Y and subsequent generations this includes the extended time now spent in education when a majority are juggling study and work, the trend towards precarious work (that is, short-term and part-time contract work, flexible and non-standard hours), and the ubiquity of social media.

Despite the challenges they face daily with amazing resilience, young people do get a lot of bad press, I am sad to say. Generation Y (those who are now in their late twenties) are routinely portrayed as narcissistic and self-obsessed – the 'me' generation, also known as KIPPERS (Kids in Parents Pockets Living Off Retirement Savings). But stereotypes, while they may draw on a tiny grain of 'truth' are always inaccurate – and they can be damaging. The Life Patterns longitudinal shows that the reality is very different from the media version – let me expand on that.

In the period between 2006 when Gen Y left school and 2015 little changed in their top priorities in life for the participants in our study. They placed a high priority on ‘having a special relationship with someone’, ‘having financial security’ and ‘caring and providing for a family’. The life goal of ‘living up to ethical principles gained new importance and others: to make a lot of money’ and ‘to achieve a position of influence’ lessened in importance over that time.

To achieve these modest life goals, Gen Y have had to be resourceful, flexible and resilient. Let me share just one of many stories from our study to illustrate this:

Rebecca went straight on to tertiary study after completing secondary school in 2006, taking up studies in physiotherapy. However, a year later she discontinued this course because, saying that she was disappointed in it. She then completed a Bachelor of Arts at a different university, majoring in psychology – combining full time study with part time work as a sales assistant. She was still living with her parents (in Melbourne), and by age 22 she said she would have liked to move out but didn’t think she could afford to, and she felt a bit overwhelmed by a sense of insecurity about her future. In 2012 Rebecca, now aged 24 started a Masters in Speech Pathology that would “open up a career path to where I want to be.” By the age of 25, in 2013, Rebecca had finished her Masters degree, and moved to a regional area to take up a job as a paediatric speech pathologist. While this took her “away from my friends, boyfriend and family, which has been stressful” she gained experience that ultimately enabled her to take up a full-time, secure job in speech pathology in Melbourne (in 2016). Like many young people, Rebecca experienced periods of stress, partly because she felt overwhelmed by and the pressures of work and study and she had to work at keeping well. Rebecca felt very proud of her achievements, saying that she thought she had achieved “a lot” for someone her age.

In many ways Rebecca is typical. She has invested in her education well into her twenties, shifted focus at least once, and made sacrifices to get work in her field of study. She is honest about the ongoing challenge of balancing study, work, relationships and wellbeing.

For Gen Y, as for successive generations, education is a vital key to securing future goals.

Today, you receive a credential – but perhaps more importantly, along the way to achieving this you have also learned a lot about yourself and your environment, what you are good at and what you are not good at, how you learn best, how to juggle multiple responsibilities and priorities and how to be well. This means valuing the people around you and being prepared to ask for help or advice. As much as your credential, these qualities will serve you well in your next steps.

Whatever your paths from here, I wish you the very best. Some of you may return to this university as part of your onward educational journey, and others to other educational destinations. As alumni of The University of Melbourne, you are always welcome here.

To return to the present, today is a day of celebration and a time to be justly proud of your achievements. Congratulations to our graduands and to everyone who has played a part in their success.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today we are delighted to welcome as guest speaker Professor Johanna Wyn from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Professor Wyn is Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor in the School's Youth Research Centre. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences Australia and the Academy of Social Sciences in the UK. Johanna's work focuses on young people's transitions and the knowledge and skills needed by professionals who work with young people.

*Her books include Young People Making it Work and Youth and Generation: Rethinking change and inequality in the lives of young people. She leads the longitudinal research program *Life Patterns*, supported by the Australian Research Council. Johanna's research focuses on the ways young people navigate their lives in a changing world, with a focus on transition, gender, wellbeing and inequality. Her work recognises that young people are active citizens, cultural creators and active agents in their own learning and wellbeing. It is a pleasure to call on her to speak today. Please welcome Professor Johanna Wyn.*