

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Thursday 18 December 2019, 11.00am

Susan Oliver AM FAICD
Chair, The Wheeler Centre
Chair, Campus Living Villages
Board Member, Melbourne Theatre Company

Congratulations on successfully completing your degree. It is a significant moment in your life and I am proud to share that moment with you.

You may wonder why I am here today talking to you. Well, I was sitting exactly where you are some 45 years ago, graduating with what was then known as the degree of Bachelor of Building (QS). I was the only woman to have started and completed the course. I was also a country girl, very new to city life, and the first person in my family to go to university.

The diverse skills and experiences I derived from the course have taken me in some exciting and unpredictable directions.

I have been able to carve out a career using not only the technical skills I gained – in technology, in business, in building and land economics – but also the broader principles of environmental sustainability and social equity.

In the brief time I have available, let me give you a taste of what I've been able to achieve in my career, and in so doing, hopefully inspire you in the same way.

My work in housing and building involved a stint as manager in what was then called the Housing Commission, and I later became embroiled in urban renewal, project managing the Emerald Hill urban renewal project.

In 1990 I headed up a think tank on the future and published a magazine

I led the team which developed the use concept for Federation Square, and in 1995, I was appointed a non-executive director on the board of Transurban to build the Melbourne CityLink, becoming one of the early pioneers of women on boards. This began my career in corporate governance.

Things have snow-balled since then. Today, I am chairman of Campus Living Villages which has 44,000 student accommodation units in the UK, US, Australia and NZ. I am on the investment committee for IFM, an organisation which has more than \$110bill of investment in large infrastructure such as ports and airports, in Australia and around the world. And I sit on the advisory board for Fishermans Bend, where redevelopment of 500 hectares of land adjoining the Melbourne city, must meet critical challenges such as affordable housing and sustainability.

My work with early computing at university gave me the confidence to lead a strategic business unit for a leading technology consulting firm. Today I have my own technology product and start-up.

The experience of being the only woman in my course and trying – sometimes fighting - to find my way in a male-dominated industry where bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination were rife has become a major theme in my career. I received support from pioneering women lecturers Elizabeth Coldicutt, Helen Tippett, and Blanche Merz and followed their lead to mentor other women. Six years ago, I was one of the founders of Scale Investors, an angel network that invests in start-ups led by women. Only 2% of all funding of early stage businesses is going to women, so there is much work to be done!

I have also explored some of my wider interests. I currently chair The Wheeler Centre, which is a UNESCO centre for books and ideas, and I sit on the board of the Melbourne Theatre Company.

There have been some unexpected rewards along the way. I was offered a British Council Scholarship at Oxford University; in 2001, I received a Prime Minister's medal for services to business; and this year, I was awarded an Order of Australia for services to business and women.

Already there are too many 'Is' in this presentation and I apologise, as today is about you and the incredible challenges and opportunities that await you. But I am going to give you four more 'I's which have worked well for me and can hopefully help in anchoring your careers too:

Innovation. Your design skills and knowledge of the built environment give you a unique and wonderful opportunity to reimagine, rethink and redesign where we live, work and socialise to meet the challenges of a sustainable future – there's no time to lose!

Integrity. At the end of the day, you must be yourself. Never lose sight of who you are, what is meaningful to you and meets your values, and have the courage to put it on show so others can be inspired.

Intelligence. Use it, develop it, respect it in others – we'll need to be very intelligent to solve our social and environmental issues.

Infinite. This is an invitation to look beyond the short term. Think long term, or infinitely, as Simon Sinek urges in his book, the Infinite Game. Life is infinite and we are simply the finite players within it, Sinek says. We can live our lives with a finite mindset, accumulating wealth and power, or we can live a life of service so that those who come after us can benefit from the work we've done. It's a thought-provoking and worthwhile perspective!

On that note, I'll conclude and wish you all the very best for the adventure that lies ahead.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today the University welcomes Susan Oliver as guest speaker.

Susan is a successful ASX company director and technology investor, with experience in infrastructure, engineering, and property and investment.

Before joining boards, she had a career in technology and futures consulting, cumulating with the role of Managing Director of the Australian Government's Commission for the Future in the early 1990s.

Susan is a graduate of the University of Melbourne with the degree of Bachelor of Building (Quantity Surveying).

She is passionate about a range of not-for-profit causes. She currently chairs the Wheeler Centre and is a member of the Board of Directors for the Melbourne Theatre Company.

Susan helped found The Big Issue in Australia, and co-founded Scale Investors to fund female led startups.

Please join me in welcoming Susan Oliver.