

Occasional Address

Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, Saturday 29 July 2017, 11.00am

Professor Andrew Rosser

Professor of South East Asian Studies, University of Melbourne

Presiding Chancellor
Presiding Vice-Chancellor
Graduands
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be able to speak to you today and celebrate your achievements.

The University of Melbourne is one of the world's leading comprehensive research-intensive universities. To successfully complete a degree at this institution is a significant achievement. You should feel very proud of your success. So, too, should the people who have helped you along the way—parents, other relatives, and friends.

You should also feel excited about what the future has in store.

When I completed my undergraduate studies in Commerce and Asian Studies in the early 1990s, I had little idea that I would go on to work at a number of leading universities and research institutions, eventually becoming a university professor; produce a body of published research; travel to various parts of Asia, Europe, Australia, and the US as part of my work; and act as a consultant to a range of international development organisations.

I was much more concerned, to be frank, about simply getting a start in a career with decent prospects and which I thought I might enjoy. I graduated in the midst of a severe economic recession in Australia when graduate-level accounting jobs—indeed, any good jobs for young people—were hard to find, particularly in South Australia where I lived. At the same time, although I had completed an Honours degree in Commerce, I was not excited about the prospect of working as an accountant.

By contrast, I had really enjoyed studying Indonesian language as part of my training in Asian Studies. It was fun. I had also found learning about Indonesian politics, society and culture fascinating. The country's strangeness, its difference, captivated me. I was particularly intrigued by work that I read on the emergence of a business class in Indonesia and the effects this was having on country's economic and political development.

When Murdoch University offered me a scholarship in 1993 to do a PhD on Indonesia, focusing on the politics of economic policy-making, I consequently jumped at the chance. This proved to be a great move. I had found 'my thing'. There was no going back.

The mid-1990s was a terrific time to be carrying out research on Indonesian politics, particularly given that I had a focus on matters of economic policy. Under Prime Minister Keating, the Australian government was actively promoting greater public awareness of and discussion about Asia in recognition of the fact that Australia's interests—and especially its economic interests—were becoming increasingly tied to the region. At the same time, the region's economic success was stimulating widespread debate in academic and policy circles about the reasons for this success, the nature of the region's political and economic systems, and the implications for the rest of the world. As 'a high performing Asian economy', Indonesia's experience was relevant to these debates and a focus of considerable attention. When the Asian financial crisis then struck in 1997-1998, the country attracted further attention, this time for its economic and political troubles. Of all the countries affected by the crisis, Indonesia was the worst affected. Its economy contracted by 13 percent in 1998, triggering widespread unrest and eventually the fall of Suharto's 'New Order', a regime that had been in power for over 30 years. At the centre of the financial crisis, Indonesia's experience became central to debates over its causes and implications.

In addition to working on Indonesian politics at the right time, I was also in the right place. I could not have hoped for a more stimulating, supportive and productive environment in which to complete a PhD. I found myself surrounded by some of the top scholars in Southeast Asian studies and a group of talented PhD students, many of whom would go on to pursue successful academic careers. Through Murdoch's Asia Research Centre, I was afforded opportunities to forge excellent professional networks, become involved in joint research projects, and produce a set of publications in high quality and widely-read outlets as well as, of course, a PhD dissertation.

Most importantly, my time at Murdoch imbued in me a sense that the work I was doing was important and valuable. Given the magnitude of the events occurring in Asia—and Indonesia specifically—and the importance of the region to Australia, it became clear to me that we needed a sound understanding of the region's political and economic dynamics and what they mean for us—and that I had a role to play in this respect.

As my career progressed post-PhD, I came discover that the intellectual tools I had developed during my undergraduate and post-graduate studies were also useful in other ways. Specifically, they could contribute to our understanding of the causes of poverty and disadvantage in developing countries and the ways these problems could be addressed.

Not long after I finished my PhD, I had a stint at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, one of the world's leading think tanks in the field of international development. IDS, as the institute is commonly known, was at the time pioneering the use of 'political economy analysis' to understand the 'drivers of change' in developing countries.

I joined in this work, laying the foundations for much of the research that I have done over the past 10-15 years and which I continue to do here at Melbourne. This work has been concerned with using political economy analysis to understand various development challenges that Indonesia has faced and think about new ways in which they can be addressed. These challenges have included the persistence of illegal fees in education and health services, breaches of social rights, corporate irresponsibility, and problems of teacher distribution.

In the moments that I have left, let me make two suggestions as you contemplate what to do next in your careers.

First, pursue a career that you enjoy and gives you a sense of purpose. Motivation is crucial to success and you are unlikely to be motivated if you do not enjoy and believe in what you are doing.

Second, think about ways that you can apply your skills to help solve problems, whether these are big or small, global, national or local in scope. The STEM disciplines can tell us much about how to address problems as can technically-oriented non-STEM disciplines such as economics and law. But they cannot tell us everything. Many of the biggest problems we face have political, social or cultural roots and it is here that graduates from the humanities and social sciences have important insights to offer.

Thank you for the opportunity to give this talk. Congratulations again on your achievements and good luck in taking your next steps.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Presiding Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen:

This morning's guest speaker is Professor Andrew Rosser, who is professor of South East Asian Studies at the University of Melbourne.

Andrew began his academic career by taking undergraduate degrees in Commerce at the University of Adelaide, and in Asian Studies at Flinders University. He later completed his PhD with a focus on Asian studies and politics at Murdoch University.

In an active academic career he has conducted field research in Indonesia, worked with development organisations including the World Bank, Oxfam and the United Nations Development Program, as well as the OECD and government departments in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Andrew has worked at the University of Sydney, AusAid, the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex in the UK, and at the University of Adelaide.

From 2012 to 2015, he held a much-prized Australian Research Council Future Fellowship, to research law, politics and social rights in Indonesia.

Andrew is a leading Australian authority on the politics of South East Asia.

It's a pleasure to invite him to speak this morning. Please join me in welcoming Professor Andrew Rosser.