I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Cadigal people
of the Eora nation, and pay respects to Indigenous elders past and present, and
any Aboriginal people with us today.

Hi everyone, it’s fantastic to be back here at Canterbury after five years away.
And I’ve got to say, not much has changed! I have to confess I still felt a slight
sense of trepidation walking into Ms Holden’s office this morning, sorry Ms
Holden! And as evidenced, I still can’t bring myself to call my old teachers by
their first names, so I guess some habits die hard.

I’ve been invited back today to share my thoughts on life after school, and on
what I’ve learnt about life and education in general. I’ll clarify that I’m no expert
on how to be a good learner or on what study techniques work best. Another
confession - during my time at uni I’ve definitely had my share of late
assignments and midnight cram sessions, which I’m sure many of the year 11s
and 12s here can relate to. So I’m not going to stand here and tell you that there’s
one fool-proof secret to getting a 99.95 ATAR or coming first in a subject,
because to be honest neither of those things is an accurate measurement of a
person’s future success or worth anyway.

But what I do want to talk about is what I’ve learnt outside of the classroom and
the lecture theatre, and educating yourself beyond things you can learn in a
textbook or an exam. Because when I reflect on my last five years since leaving
school and what I’ve learnt and how I’ve grown as a person, I don’t think about
the marks I got or the essays I wrote. I think about the people I’ve met and the
things I’ve done alongside and outside of my formal education.

The first lesson I’ve learnt is that education is not and never should be a race or a
commodity. I’m currently entering my fifth year of a three-year degree at Sydney
Uni. I used to be embarrassed to tell people that, in case they thought it meant
that I was lazy or slow. Now I’m proud to say that the reason I’m studying part-
time is because I work two jobs, have sat on the executive of multiple clubs and
societies at university, do volunteer work, and of course spend a lot of time
drinking at the university bar. And these are all good and important things to do,
especially that last one.

Education is a passion of mine, but it’s also incredibly important to have
interests and passions outside of formal education. Those of you who do go onto
university in particular will find that one of the best ways to meet new people
and make friends in a university of 50,000 is to join clubs and societies, go to
parties, volunteer for things, and yes, have a drink with your classmates after a
tutorial or a lecture. A lot of people go through their degrees going from home to
class to home again, never engaging in university life, and that’s a shame because
some of the best memories I have and the best people I’ve met have been
through doing things that you don’t get an end-of-semester grade for. Your time
at university should be some of the best, most formative and exciting years of
your life. So don’t stress about how long it takes you to get through a degree or
what jobs it might qualify you for after. Just be prepared to enjoy the ride and try
to get as much out of this opportunity as you can.
The second lesson I’ve learnt is how important it is to be socially conscious and politically aware. This was something that was developed while at school here through doing amazing subjects like Legal Studies and Society and Culture, which I would definitely recommend to those of you in the audience thinking about what subjects to do in your senior years. But when you enter the outside world, be it at university or TAFE or in the workplace, you can begin to realize just how much of our everyday lives are influenced by who’s in government or what’s happening overseas.

Whether it be the environment and climate change, refugee rights, women’s rights, health and education, international relations, Indigenous rights, or making sure everyone has equal rights and opportunities in the workplace, these are all things that affect each of us at a direct or indirect level every day. To give you a recent example, when the Federal Government announced in 2014 that they wanted to allow universities to charge upwards of $100,000 for a degree, students across the country mobilized to protest these changes, because we realized it would make it harder for so many people to access higher education, be it students from poorer backgrounds, women, or migrants. And with the support of community groups, unions, and other organisations, we won that fight and the government dropped the policy.

The reason I bring up that example is because it shows that each of us, individually and collectively, has the power to make change and have influence. It sounds like a cliché, and perhaps it is, but it’s also fundamentally true. Everyone in this audience who is lucky enough to go to school, to be educated, to learn how to understand concepts and theories, has a responsibility to use the power and privilege that education gives you to support those who are less fortunate in our society. This goes back to my first point – that education is not a process you go through simply to get a job and earn money, but it’s a tool that can be used to achieve something beyond yourself and to help others. In particular, those of you who are perhaps the first in your family to graduate year 12 or the first to go onto university – use this opportunity to do something with your education and go out into the community to make a positive difference.

And the last lesson I’ve learnt is also perhaps the most relevant to me and to all the young women in the audience, and I think it ties everything that I’ve said so far together. And that is the fundamental importance, no matter what you do or what your passions are, of being a strong, independent-minded, and empowered woman. I am forever grateful that I came to an all-girls school like Canterbury, because what it taught me is that woman can do everything – I’ve seen women at this school achieve incredible things in academia and sport, I’ve seen them perform in dance, drama, and music, whilst other women manage the stage crew and sound and lighting. And I’ve seen amazing leadership skills in our prefects and public speakers, including at this assembly today.

There’s a special sense of solidarity and sisterhood amongst women and girls and that’s a powerful thing. Almost everything that I’ve achieved both at school and beyond has been inspired by some amazing women, whether it be a teacher,
a friend, our first female Prime Minister, or my own mother. I think the motto that sums this up best is that “when women support women, women win”. Whether it be at university or work or in your private lives, you’ll encounter people who will try to make you believe that you’re just not good enough or you just don’t deserve something. But let me tell you from experience, if you have other women to support you and back you up, somehow those other opinions just seem less important.

Now I’m not too old to remember what it’s like sitting in these assemblies so I just want to finish by congratulating everyone graduating from year 12 and everyone else being recognized for their achievements today. In particular, to those of you about to embark on the next chapter of your education, I want to wish you absolutely all the best. School is over and now the real learning is about to start, so dive in!

Thank you.