

‘Grand Challenge on Inequality’, launch speech by Professor Ian Jacobs, President and Vice-Chancellor UNSW Sydney, UNSW, 24 February 2017

Thank you everyone for being here today on this very significant occasion – the launch of another of our UNSW Grand Challenges. Last year we launched two Grand Challenges - on Climate Change, and on Refugees and Migration, two of the really pressing issues facing the world now. The third issue we have set out to tackle, Inequality, is no less daunting - yet it's perhaps harder to pin down, to illustrate and put on YouTube, and harder even to establish its root causes, which are complex and diverse.

Equality is enshrined in national and international agendas: the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda commits to ‘leave no one behind’, while the International Labour Organisation’s aim of ‘decent work for all’ embraces a similar ethos. Indeed, the UN Universal Declaration of Rights begins unequivocally, ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’ Yet in 2017 almost nobody disputes that real inequality exists, that the problem grows worse not better in many nations, and that it poses a fundamental, and even existential, threat to humanity. The projections do not look encouraging.

I was disturbed to read, for example, that the World Economic Forum, meeting in Davos recently, has significantly downgraded its projection for reaching global gender equality. On current estimates, it would be achieved worldwide in the year 2186 – a mere 170 years away! Two years ago the same forecast estimated that gender parity could be reached by 2095, so things are getting worse, not better.

The challenge is becoming greater, and it demands solutions urgently.

There are many kinds of inequality: economic, social, cultural, gender and sexuality, and inequalities based on race, nationality, religion, and disability. Each is a problem; but worse, each often coexists with others, so that the confluence of numerous inequalities becomes a danger and a disruptor to established societies. These are the challenges we face, and – like climate change, and refugees and migration – they are not by any means confined to poor nations, or those without the means to make a difference. Inequality is an insidious virus that undercuts nearly all societies, and exists within nations, and between nations.

Most income inequality in the world is actually reflected in differences *between* countries rather than within them, although the gaps between rich and poor, even in wealthy nations like the United States, appear vast and are growing wider. In reality, a ‘dirt-poor’ American has a higher annual income at \$5,440 than a rich individual in a poor country like Niger in Africa. As the head of the World Economic Forum put the choice rather grimly in Davos, ‘Would you rather be rich in a poor country, or poor in a rich country?’

That is not a choice anyone should be forced to make, of course.

We should all have the right, the *birthright*, to live in our own countries, and a right to gain employment there, to live there as equals. But inequality drives people to leave, to become migrants and refugees, to seek if not wealth then steps to greater equality. According to the UNHCR, in 2015 there were more than 60-million people in the world uprooted from their homes by conflict and persecution. Two-thirds are internally displaced; the rest have fled their countries, seeking asylum. Last year over 30-thousand people were forced to flee their homes *every day*. To one degree or another, they are all victims of inequality. And borders and barriers to refugees, and to worker mobility, are going up everywhere.

Globalisation has created inequalities too, as have automation and robotics. Artificial intelligence, A.I., will almost certainly take job displacement to higher levels, adding another element of unpredictability into the mix. The co-founder of Google, Sergey Brin, sees A.I. as the 'natural continuation' of the industrialisation of the past two centuries, while expressing the rather tenuous hope that A.I. might free up people to lead 'more interesting lives'. What it will do to skills and employment is difficult to predict, he says, adding, 'We don't really know the limits.' Let *me* predict that poorer paid workers will suffer disproportionately.

Increasing casualisation of workforces is another blow; the pay rates are generally lower, and come mostly without health or pension benefits, adding to inequality. And populations continue to expand rapidly in developing countries, creating further pressures in what are often struggling economies. So as the world moves with breathtaking velocity towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with literally billions of people connected by mobile devices, the battle for equality on all fronts will require a comparable revolution in our thinking, a new social compact. Where will this come from, and what form will it take?

What role can universities like UNSW play, and can they realistically make a difference, given the enormous scale of this problem? I believe they can, so long as what they attempt is not piecemeal, but coordinated and focused. Under our 2025 Strategy, I am certain we can do that: by streaming the problems through our three pillars of academic excellence, social engagement and global impact, we can bring our skills and knowledge to bear on at least some of these inequities. On growing income and wealth inequality. On technology-related job displacement. And certainly, by actively promoting women's equal participation in education, employment and society - and in business and political leadership - across the world, and indeed, across our own campus. These are just some areas that the UNSW Grand Challenge on Inequality will address as we move into the uncertainties of 2017 and beyond.

The years ahead will require outstanding leadership in the face of many global issues, as rising levels of conflict, and social and political division, challenge many of the gains made in the past fifty years, and many of the assumptions we hold. The Brexit vote and the rise of Donald Trump were expressions not only of dissatisfaction with ruling elites, but of growing levels of social and economic inequality, even in relatively rich countries. People feel both excluded and disempowered, and left behind, and their frustrations are clearly rising.

Just a few days ago, the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau blamed corporate and government leaders for the anger rocking politics globally - warning that low wages and the shift to precarious part-time work were threatening societies, and rising inequality was making citizens distrustful of their governments. He said it was time for political and business leaders to 'step up' and address inequality.

As a great university – as a servant of society – we also have a duty to tackle these challenges, to create a public platform for debates and a showcase for research, to be a source of information and expertise, and to provoke and challenge the status quo. We need to open the widest possible door to the world, so that everything we do has both social value and global impact. That is the real hallmark of a forward-looking, 21st century university - and the battle for equity, for equality, sits at the very heart of that.

I thank Professor Ros Dixon and Professor Richard Holden for their leadership so far of the UNSW Grand Challenge on Inequality, I thank all associated with the project, and I am sure it will be an outstanding success. I wish you well in your discussions today, on one of the burning issues of our time.

Thank you.