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THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO UNIVERSITY
AN INTERVIEW WITH JUSTICE MICHAEL KIRBY

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What is your fondest memory of university?: Friends. Life-long friends. People I got to know in the intense time of University and whose friendship I have kept over my entire life. I also loved the student activities. I became a juggernaut of student politics. It was a great experience. Strange but true, my grades improved.

Describe the type of student you were at university. Did you feel comfortable in the role of a student?: I was a bit of a swat. I was very disciplined and motivated to do well. I had come up to University with a top pass in the then Leaving Certificate. I was very competitive. I developed a technique of answering examination questions. Masochistically, I even ended up enjoying exams!

Why did you decide to attend university? What made you choose to study law, economics and arts?: In Sydney, I attended Fort Street High School - the nation's oldest public school (1849). It was selective and full of talented students. Going to University was expected. I was good at debating and drama. So law was a natural vocation. I studied economics, after my law degree, partly to give credence to my career as a student politician.

What was your most outrageous experience as a student?: I did not have enough of them. This is something I regret.

Were you involved in university culture, as a member of clubs or the student union?: In my second last year of law, I ran for the

Students' Law Society and then the SRC. I was elected and enjoyed the rivalry and the ideas. Later I became SCR President and President of the University Union. These were great experiences in my life and led to many friendships.

What were your study habits like? Did you cram for exams?

Do you have any tips?: Boringly enough, I was very focussed and disciplined. I studied consistently and did well. There was the inevitable cramming for exams. In my law course, this was done at night after a busy work in the office and in court. I used to answer my exams in multicolour ink, with headings and abstracts. By the late years of my studies, I had developed a technique of writing exam scripts. Clear communication is important in the exams of a University student as in the reasons of a High Court judge.

Describe the atmosphere on University of Sydney campus when you studied. In what ways do you think today's students are different to your contemporaries?:

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, the University of Sydney was rather like an extension of private school education. But the SRC supported Aboriginal causes, the abandonment of White Australia, the needs of disadvantaged students and women's rights. Gradually we became more concerned with social justice. I get an impression that students today may be more conservative. But we should remember that no one in my years at University ever spoke of gay rights. Nor did they consider the interface of modern human rights and fundamentalist religions. Each generation has new issues and problems. To some of them, we are still blind.

Did you ever encounter any type of discrimination on campus?

Do you have any advice for young students who are in the process

of realising their sexuality? There was no discrimination because my days at University observed the rule: "Don't ask. Don't tell". Only later did I come to realise that this involves gay people conspiring in their own invisibility and discrimination. It is irrational and unscientific. University people, including students, should be leaders in demolishing the dogma and ignorance of the past. Things are easier today; but only because of greater knowledge, more science and individual courage. Everyone should be proud of themselves. Members of sexual minorities must come to peace with the fact that that is how God or nature meant them to be. Those who have problems with this should just get over it.

You served as Chancellor of Macquarie University and Deputy Chancellor at University of Newcastle. As the role of Chancellor is shrouded in mystery for many students, can you explain exactly what is it that a Chancellor does? A Chancellor chairs the University Council meetings; attends endless committees, dinners and other University functions; and presides at Graduation Ceremonies. A Chancellor is in some ways like the State Governor. The job is partly ceremonial. But it also involves a right to be consulted; to give encouragement and to warn where things appear to be going wrong in the University. A Chancellor should be a defender of academic freedom and the values of a liberal university. There is something of a tendency amongst Chancellors to get involved in micro-management and to cut across the function of the Vice-Chancellor, as Chief Executive. I never did this and do not agree with such interference in management.

How did serving as Chancellor alter your perceptions of higher education? Did you enjoy the role? I greatly enjoyed the Graduation Ceremonies - giving out the testamurs (degrees), prizes

and medals and feeling the palpable joy of students after years of work crowned by achievement. Working closely with some of the top brains in the country was an inspiration. I have kept close links with many universities in Australia and overseas. It is a special culture. The culture of academic and personal freedom. Every University person must be a defender and promoter of that culture. We must defend pure research and resist business and governmental efforts to turn research into immediate profits. Some of the most important discoveries have been made simply because of curiosity. David Baltimore's Nobel Prize was for his study into a strange retrovirus in monkeys. This proved invaluable when AIDS unexpectedly came along.

If you were Education Minister for a day, what would you do?:

I would send my officials back to the old files of the Chifley/Menzies Commonwealth Scholarships. It was these scholarships that got John Howard, Murray Gleeson, me and many thousands of others through University, effectively for no fee. When we graduated we paid high taxes and that was our repayment to society. It was a very good scheme and I would investigate how it could be reintroduced. Putting a millstone of HECS around the necks of young people is a serious discouragement to the bright children of poorer or struggling parents. In tertiary education, above all else, we should assure equal opportunity and encouragement of talent.

To what extent do you attribute your stellar legal achievements to your experiences at university?: My biggest debt is to my parents and my siblings for genetics, support and unfailing love. My next debt is to my teachers, at school and University. I had great teachers at the Sydney Law School. Julius Stone taught me to search for legal principle and policy and to question

orthodoxy. If universities do not do this, who will? My next debt is to my friends and colleagues at school and University and at work. Only later came my close friends and my partner, Johan.

What advice do you have for students embarking upon first year university? To study hard. To be well organised and efficient in time management. To make friends. And to join at least one University society. Have fun. Your University days will clatter around in your minds for the rest of your lives.

Biographical details: Sydney University: BA (1959), LL.M (Hons 1) (1967), B.Ec (1966). Chancellor of Macquarie University 1984-1993. Deputy Chancellor at University of Newcastle (1978-83); Fellow of the Senate of the University of Sydney (1964-69); President Sydney University Union (1964-65), President, Sydney SRC (1961-62).