The Second Alumni Lecture – Baroness Susan Greenfield CBE

Baroness Susan Greenfield CBE, Patron of the South Australian Universities Alumni UK and Director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, gave our Second Alumni Lecture at the Ri on 28th April 2009 in the Sunley Room. Her lecture was entitled “The 21st Century Mind. Unchanged or Unprecedented”. The Lecture was very well attended and provoked an interesting discussion afterwards and at a Reception in the Atrium.

The First Alumni Lecture was given by Professor James Crawford SC, Arbitrator and Mediator and Whewell Professor of International Law at the University of Cambridge in Cambridge. James is a law graduate of the University of Adelaide and renown international human rights lawyer.

Our Second Alumni Lecture was generously supported by The University of Adelaide, Development and Alumni, and which was represented by Dr. Ian S Lowndes, Associate Professor and Reader in Environmental Engineering, MSc PhD CEng CSci CMath FIMMM MIMA, Department of Chemical and Environmental, Engineering Faculty of Engineering University of Nottingham, UK. Dr. Lowndes is also Visiting Professor at the School of Civil, Environmental and Mining Engineering at The University of Adelaide. Dr. Lowndes visits the University at least twice a year (as he says, there aren’t many mines left in the UK) and spoke about the global activities of the University. Afterwards, he presented Baroness Greenfield with a gift from the University. We were delighted to have Dr. Lowndes with us and to have such a link with the University and South Australia.

Baroness Greenfield’s lecture was based on her book published in 2008 “ID. The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century”. Susan shared some thought provoking trends – one such trend around the huge force of technology such as video games and its impact on human development in terms of individuality and identity development, particularly of young people. She spoke of ‘. . . the dynamism, the ‘plasticity’ of the brain . . . how our identity is our brain or rather our mind’, and how a range of different experiences and different connections can strengthen the brain’s malleability, thereby differentiating one brain from another. She went on to say that in the young person’s brain which is still developing and ‘. . . most malleable according to what inputs are most hardworking and in whatever brain areas’, the future technologies will certainly impact the way young people might think and learn differently from preceding generations, and which will have implications as to what kind of people they might become.

She told our audience and the House of Lords this year that children’s experiences on social networking sites ”. . . are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance. As a consequence, the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilised, characterised by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity”.

Whilst future technologies also bring benefits, such as an increased level of society’s IQ from the use of the internet, Susan maintains that we all have a responsibility to look at what we want for ourselves, for our children and for our future society, and to consider how we shape that future.

In May 2007, in London, the Premier of South Australia announced the establishment of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, RiAus in Adelaide. It is being established in the renovated Adelaide Old Stock Exchange building and will be opened in the presence of HRH the Duke of Kent and the Director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain in October this year. The architect for the renovation is Denis Harrison, University of Adelaide law and architecture graduate and legendary Black’s footballer. Professor Greenfield is closely associated with
South Australia having been Adelaide "Thinker in Residence" twice. She was made an Honorary Australian of the Year in 2007. RiAus will function independently but closely with the Ri in London. Professor Greenfield’s dream is to have a network of similar organisations around the world. Independent of politics and ideologies, science could cross borders, she says.

Disadvantaged South Australian school children visit the Ri in London every year for the Ri’s famous Christmas Lectures (SpiRit of Science Program). The Alumni supports this initiative by taking the children on visits to such places as Google, The Globe Theatre, Vodafone, Lord’s Cricket Ground and Abbey Road Studios to walk the pedestrian crossing and draw on the wall.

Alumni Committee members Elsa D’Ercoli (Vice President), Simon Fourmy (Hon. Secretary), Diane Tofts (Hon. Treasurer), Sonja Townsend, Amy Lunn, Chantal Hirth and visiting Life Member from Tokyo, Kristina Dryza hosted the event with the generous help of the Ri staff. Our thanks go to them for all their support.

We look forward to the Third Alumni Lecture next year.

Dennis Muirhead

President

South Australian Universities Alumni UK

London