

KEECT Awards Ceremony Speech

Good afternoon to all of our wonderful guests here today – and a particularly warm welcome to the stunning Kate Edger Educational Charitable Trust scholars for 2015. Today marks the day that you join your fellow thirteen-syllable award winners – and the Trust are so proud to be honouring your achievements to date and to come.

Being invited to share this incredibly special celebration with you all is unbelievably exciting for me. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting all of you yet, but I'm already one of your biggest fans – your commitment to education, your excitement for what you can contribute to society, and your motivation to excel against all odds is a shining example for your community, for women, and for society at large.

A brief introduction to myself: I'm a student by day; a social and environmental entrepreneur by night. Since the age of fifteen, the bulk of my time and energy has been poured into serving, leading and founding not-for-profit organisations that are tackling issues as diverse as poverty in Asia, water security in the Pacific, and educational inequality in New Zealand.

I have an intimate relationship with caffeine – I did the math the other day, and the amount that I spend on coffee every year could buy me a smartphone. I also have an irrational fear of birds – they terrify me to the point that I actively slow down when there's a pigeon walking in front of me in the street, much to the confusion of pedestrians walking behind me.

Finally, and what's more relevant for us today – I am a fresh-out-of-university civil engineering graduate. As of November last year, I was awarded my piece of paper that tells the world I'm not completely useless and that I could *probably* design a dam that wouldn't collapse anytime soon.

Now, to the celebrations for this afternoon. Frankly, you are all worth celebrating for hours, days – but because I only have a few minutes, I want to celebrate with you by sharing a few key tips for you as you enter into, or continue your tertiary degree. Specifically, as a fellow student to a fellow student, I want to give you a bit of insider information – or as us kids say these days, a 'low-down' – of the five most crucial things to bring with you as you enter into this new phase of your life.

Firstly: Café loyalty cards. Start collecting them wherever you go to build up your arsenal, and I highly recommend getting a personal filing system going.

Why is this crucial? I'll cut to the chase. University is going to be tough – it is for everyone at some point in their degree, without exception. There are going to be late nights and early mornings; you are going to procrastinate – yes, you, every single one of you; and there will be at least one of *those* days when you'll look at yourself in the mirror, and say: 'You idiot. Why on earth did you sign up yourself up for this?!'

It's at times like these that you'll need your café loyalty cards to get you through the day – or whatever equivalent of caffeine works for you. It's the thing that will keep your feet moving when all you want to do is stop; it's the mantra that you mutter to yourself when you get up; it's the gummy bears on the textbook motivating you to keep reading. Find your juice for resilience, and hold on to it for those rainy days that are going to come, and for the hard yards ahead.

Secondly: Make sure you always have credit on your phone.

It will come in handy more often than once when you need to call your 'squad' – or in non-hip-teen language, your supporters. Because university is going to be a ride of a life-time, but a tough one at that, you will need a few key individuals in your life to be your rocks, your cornerstones. They will hold you down when you want to up and leave; they will cover for you, lie for you, stay awake for you; they will make sure you're taking care of yourself when you start forgetting how to.

Everyone's squad will be different, and uniquely there for you. For me – it's my mother, my partner, and my barista. For you – it could be your family, your friends, your mentors, your community. Actively surround yourself with your unconditional backers. Have a conversation with them before you embark on this journey so that they know how important this is to you. Let them know that you want them by your side as you go through this - and don't hesitate to draw on their unconditional support, in the same way that you would provide it to them if they needed it. Your squad will be one of your biggest assets as you embark on this journey – so make sure you store up that credit so that you can ring them, anytime, anywhere, for anything, and they'll be there for you.

Thirdly: Bring a big, sturdy bag with you to carry around your textbooks and notes, leaving your hands free to grab hold of all of the opportunities that will come your way. [You just cringed, didn't you? That was probably the worst pun of this speech – it's only upwards from the bottom of the barrel, I promise.]

Consider this: the diversity of the environment that you will be entering into is one that you'll likely never encounter anywhere and anytime else in your life. There will be so many individuals from so many different walks of life under the same roof – people of different ethnicities, ages, political inclinations, interests, even dietary requirements. You will have the opportunity to sit next to someone from a completely different background to you, and have conversations with someone who you completely disagree with.

I've hung out with people who are decades older than me, studying completely different things to me, and whose ideologies directly challenge mine. Through such conversations, I can confidently tell you that there is no better way to learn about the world. Whether it's through joining the wide variety of student groups on campus, or simply striking up a conversation with someone new in class – I sincerely urge you to keep your hands free to grasp these opportunities and your brain open to engaging in different perspectives. This is part of what makes tertiary institutions such a unique hub for learning above and beyond what you learn in your courses – so absolutely exploit that while you have that privilege.

Fourthly: Don't ever forget to pack your ID card.

It can often feel like you're in a big, vast ocean – and you're a tiny, inconsequential drop in the ocean. Even with your café loyalty cards, and even with your squad on call, there are occasions when you could lose sight of why you wanted this in the first place. Indeed, there are occasions when you may feel like an 'imposter' – whether it's because of your gender, your ethnicity, or any other classification that may categorise you as a 'minority' in the world of tertiary study – and on these occasions you may begin to question whether you deserve to be where you are.

When you can feel this sentiment encroaching on you – look at it in its face, and scoff. Never allow anyone – fellow students, male students, lecturers, society – make you feel like an imposter. Your dream, your goal, your place at your tertiary institution – these are all as valid as anyone else's. Embrace your identity as a tertiary student – your figurative ID card – and remember that you are on this journey for a reason, and that reason is to make your mark on the world with your entirely unique heart, head and hands. You belong here as much as everyone else does – no one has the capability to undermine that truth except you.

As a side note – your real ID card will also get you some handy discounts. [#studentlife]

Finally: Remember your bus fare to get home – because during and beyond your tertiary degree, the fruits of your education are absolutely worth sharing, particularly with your loved ones and your community.

Your education will leverage the impact you can have on the world around you – and hopefully you're as excited about this as I am. For those of you who will graduate as educators, you will shape our nation with the passion and advocacy you bring to your classrooms; for those becoming social workers, you will strengthen the crucial tapestry of support for our country's most vulnerable; for those going into nursing, engineering, or medicine, your skills will deliver core infrastructure and healthcare that allows for society to thrive.

The force for change and influence that you choose to become with your degree is up to you to shape – and to channel some of this impact and influence back to where you came from will inspire others to follow in your significant footsteps. By virtue of you being the wonderful women that you are, you will undoubtedly graduate into positions of influence as role models. Embrace your position as a role model for females around the country – we need more of you to continue to grow the confidence and opportunities for our young women.

So, ladies - that brings us to the end of our list of the five most crucial things that I think you need to remember to bring with you to tertiary study. You need your café loyalty cards to keep you resilient; credit on your phone to rally your squad when you need them; a bag to free up your hands for the opportunities that will come your way; your ID card to remind you of your right to belong and dream; and finally, your bus fare back home so that you can share your inspirational stories with those who need to hear it the most.

I hope this has helped to provide some insight into the journey ahead of you. I am so unbelievably proud of you all – it has been a privilege to share such a wonderful afternoon with you. I sincerely, wholeheartedly, and very enthusiastically wish you all the very, very, very best for your adventures ahead – I can't wait to see where you go, and be evermore inspired by what you do for yourself and the world around you.