

teaching



Jane Garvey

Mac.Rob girls embrace their 'inner nerd'

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Mac.Rob is the only selective government school in Victoria offering single sex education and generations of former students tell us how grateful they are for the education and the confidence it gave them to continue on to a tertiary qualification. Many tell us that they realised only in retrospect the advantages they experienced by attending the school and they look back now with great affection at their time here.

One of the aspects of the school about which former students are very clear is the value of experiencing membership of a culturally diverse school. Enrolment patterns at Mac.Rob have followed the pattern of migration to Australia. During the years prior to the first World War, many European migrant families were represented here, especially Italian and Jewish families.

In the post war years there were even more European countries represented including a large number of students from Greek families. Following the Vietnam War, Mac.Rob enrolled many students from Vietnamese families. We currently also have a large number of students from families migrating from China and the Indian Subcontinent.

None of our students are International students; they are all Australians or permanent residents. What is most striking things about multicultural Mac.Rob is the way in which it is part and parcel of everyday life in which acceptance of difference is taken as the norm. Indeed the differences are celebrated with an annual student initiated and organised multicultural week, which invites everyone to recognise the diversity – which is taken for



granted most of the time. Students from different backgrounds interact naturally and collegiately in an inclusive and friendly environment which we value enormously and which prepares them to be active citizens of Australian society.

The arguments for single sex education of girls have been put forward many times but one of the most cogent reasons is, I believe, that it enables girls to strive for excellence unimpeded by the presence of boys who can be physically and socially dominant in many educational settings. This effect is enhanced in a selective girls' school by the fact that it is "cool" to excel in such subjects as physics and mathematics where such classrooms are a welcoming environment, often managed by female teachers

They genuinely celebrate each others' successes

who are passionate about their subjects. When there are eight classes of chemistry in Year 12, it is impossible to feel that this is not a subject that girls should be studying. Mac.Rob students are characterised by a strong sense of where their careers might lead and seek to gain entry to university courses which will enable them to take advantage of the best opportunities available.

Many of our students are blessed with a delightfully ironic sense of humour and love to make jokes about 'embracing your inner nerd'. They are ambitious, hardworking, focussed and keen to experience success in a wide range of fields. They enjoy collaborating with students from our brother school, Melbourne High School, and often form friendships through joint activities but many of them deliberately limit their social life to enable them to focus on their work.

I enjoy the fact that most of our girls don't bother trying to incorporate makeup into their school appearance and are happy to don a range of practical sports outfits which enable them to throw themselves into activities or wear 'daggy' costumes as part of house activities for effect. They wear the school uniform well and take pride in their appearance but they are not focussed on attracting male attention. This businesslike approach is part of a culture which encourages them to support each other and to work together to achieve outstanding educational outcomes.

They genuinely celebrate each others' successes and take pride in the reputation of the school as one of the top achieving schools in the country. When you are accustomed to the energy, drive and *joi de vivre* that characterises our students' everyday endeavours, it is very difficult to take seriously the charge that they will not be able to function adequately in post school society because they have not benefitted from the presence of boys in the school.

Our students are offered places in Year 9 on the basis their performance in the entrance examination conducted by the Department of Education to select students for the four selective schools in Victoria. The examination is designed to test intellectual potential rather than what they have learned. Only five per cent of the Year 8 cohort of any Victorian school can be offered places at a selective school, so that the students come from a large number of other schools, many travelling significant distances.

There are some schools which resent the loss of these students but I wish those people could experience the joy that is expressed by so many of our students at finding themselves, usually for the first time in their school lives, among like others. Many highly able students have been isolated by other students previously, regarded as suspect because of their abilities. Others have experienced more overt bullying or sought to hide their intellectual capacity in order to be accepted by their peers.

It can be daunting for our students,



sometimes, to find themselves no longer the top of the class but they quickly discover that a class of highly able students is able to work through material and ideas at a speed which seems to be about four times that of a mixed ability group and that the challenges they meet ensure that they are extended and classroom boredom is a part of the past.

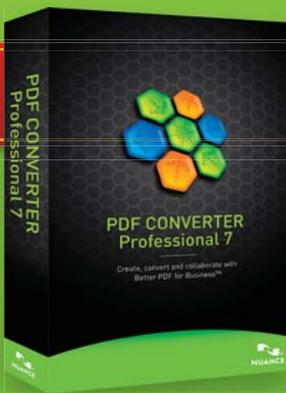
Mac.Rob Girls' students have topped the state in VCE achievement in seven of the last eight years. In 2010, 44.3 per cent of VCE study scores were over 40 (out of 50) with the next school listed achieving 39%. An amazing 49.6 per cent of student grades were A+ with more than three quarters in the A-A+ range.

Girls are usually found by researchers to be more collaborative in their work styles than are boys and when you combine this with the fact that at Mac.Rob they are also highly able students with a personal vision, enabled to extend, enrich and challenge themselves by teachers with a passion for their subject who understand how to stimulate curiosity and support their learning experiences, it is a powerful mix which magnifies the outcomes for everybody.

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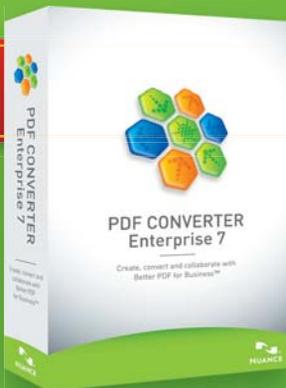
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There are always sceptics who are inclined to state that if a school's student intake is selected, then the outcomes are guaranteed. This ignores the fact that although our students are highly able, they are not always gifted across the board. Many of our students have particular abilities along with some weaknesses. What we have attempted to develop is a highly personalised education for each student, where teachers know the preferred learning styles, strengths and weaknesses of each of their students and are able to support each individual to maximise her development. In our outstanding VCE results last year, it was really pleasing to see that in addition to those students expected on the basis of their previous performances to excel, the whole cohort of students lifted their performance to achieve a general excellence even higher than in previous years. This result is made possible by the combination of factors described and provides a compelling reason for the selective nature of the student cohort.

I cannot conclude this article without reference to student leadership and the co-curricular program. We encourage young women to take on leadership roles in every sphere of endeavour and provide training in the skills needed including public speaking, running a meeting and being consultative. The co-curricular programs and activities are

a vibrant and important part of school life at Mac.Rob and build on or extend the school curriculum by enhancing personal growth and development and encouraging the students to embrace citizenship through involvement in volunteering and social service activities.

Co-curricular activities are usually student initiated and run and include house activities such as the choral and drama competitions, sport, drama/stage crew, music and music performance, special interest groups e.g. animé, debating and public speaking, subject competitions and community involvement. We try to balance academic studies and the co-curricular activities to provide the best educational experience possible and build the wellbeing of the whole person.

The school recognises excellence in every aspect of student activities and we regularly give awards and recognition of individuals and teams at school assemblies and publish achievements and prizes in the weekly newsletter, culminating in the many awards made at Speech Night each year. Even so there is the problem that so many of our students achieve such great results and so many prizes and awards throughout the year that it is impossible sometimes to recognise the outstanding work of the students who are just behind the award winners and in other schools would have been at the top. We encourage each

student to aim for her personal best in everything and are pleased that there is a strong history of participation and commitment to the school.

I am privileged to be principal of such a vibrant, dynamic student body as I have described and I think that the women who fought for the survival of the girls' school in the 1930s would be equally proud of what its students are achieving in 2011.

Acknowledgement: I would like to acknowledge the work of Ms Sue Sherson, Head Prefect in 1958, for the historical research I have used in writing this article. **ET**



About the author

Jane Garvey has been principal of The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School since 2004, prior to that she worked in four other state high schools as a teacher of English, English Literature and History and as an assistant principal. This year she celebrates 40 years with the Department of Education.

The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School

Chocolate millionaire believed in educating girls



In 1905 the Director of Education in Victoria, Sir Frank Tate, won a battle against the forces of conservatism and established the first state secondary school, The Continuation School, on the current site of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in Spring Street in Melbourne. He convinced the establishment that such a school would enable the training of teachers for the state's primary schools and Theory of Teaching was included in the curriculum.

Co-educational at its inception, the school became known as Melbourne High School in 1912 and its success created a demand for more state secondary schools to be established. In 1924 a new principal, Mr Claude Searby, was appointed at a time when a new school was being planned at Forrest Hill to replace the deteriorating and dangerous building in Spring Street.

There was a growing belief at the time that academic high schools should be for boys only and Mr Searby apparently accepted his appointment as principal of Melbourne High School conditional on the separation of the sexes.

In October 1927 Mr Searby and the boys marched to their new school in Forrest Hill South Yarra overlooking the river, taking with them the school name, its badge, motto,

traditions and the school song *Honour the Work*. The girls remained in the old building among the falling masonry under the principalship of Miss Christina Montgomery in what then became Melbourne Girls' High School. She led her staff in establishing new traditions and maintaining the excellence of the curriculum.

During the Great Depression there was no money to build a new school for the girls, although it continued to attract more students. The building was condemned in 1930 and a search began for new premises – it was also suggested that the school be disbanded. Fortunately, Government House became vacant and the school was able to take over the ground floor and the stables, however with the appointment in 1933 of a new State Governor, the search for a new home began again. With little warning, the girls were moved from Government House to West Melbourne Central School at the start of Term 2 that year. The deputy principal, later principal, Miss Rubina Gainfort, recalled that she feared that this would be the end of the school.

Unexpectedly, a white knight in the guise of chocolate millionaire Sir MacPherson Robertson, arrived on the scene with a centenary gift of £100,000 to the State of Victoria, £40,000 of which was for a new building for Melbourne

Girls' High School. A small site on the corner of Albert Park was eventually excised for educational purposes amid heated opposition from the South Melbourne Council, which felt that “anything would be better than a girls' school”.

The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School as it was renamed in honour of its benefactor was officially opened on 7th November 1934 by His Royal Highness, the Duke of Gloucester in the presence of the Premier, Sir Stanley Argyle, the Minister of Education, Mr Pennington, Director of Education Mr McRae, Sir MacPherson Robertson, and other distinguished guests.

His Royal Highness in his address said prophetically that the building “gives to Melbourne a girls' school which for many years will rank amongst the finest in the world”. Its Latin motto, “Potens Sui”, means mastery of self and has now guided the ethos of generations of young women for whom the concept is very real.

Thus it was that Mac.Rob, as it is affectionately known, came into existence despite the prevailing prejudices against the education of women and has gone on to provide generations of young women with excellence in academic education. **ET**