



# From the Principal

Peter Clague



## Putting Our Money Where Our Mouth Is

Rescued from a rubbish skip late one night with the aid of a wheelbarrow, one of my favourite possessions is a complete First Edition set of the Oxford English Dictionary. Tatty and battered, the dog-eared volumes hark from an age before Wikipedia. A time when the intended meaning of words had to be tenaciously tracked back to their hiding place in the alphabet. The beauty of the OED is its unique feature of not only giving the intended meaning of a word, but also its first recorded use (for instance, anyone who has ever been hiking will be delighted to know that “downsteepy” is an actual word, first written by an exhausted Scotsman in 1603).

However, I recently went searching through my treasured tomes for the true meaning of a far more familiar term. I could have asked Alexa or Siri I suppose, but instead I hauled out Volume 8: Q – Sh, and thumbed through to find the original meaning of “scholarship”. Which is: “An award consisting of financial support and other benefits granted to a student at a school, college, or university.” No surprise there, and most other online dictionaries give a similar definition. The Cambridge Dictionary puts it in very simple language “an amount of money given by a school, college, university, or other organisation to pay for the studies of a person with great ability but little money”.

All of which was quite reassuring, as I am uneasy about the way in which schools are increasingly using scholarships as a form of financial reward for students who can already afford to attend, rather than the original intention of providing access and opportunity for those who cannot. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging excellence of course. That is exactly what schools like St Leonard’s set out to do as part of their educational offering, and the celebration of high performance abounds throughout the College. The presentation of Colours for academic, sporting, performing arts and service excellence, a regular swag of awards at each school’s assemblies for outstanding personal accomplishment, prizes and honours at Speech Nights, captaincy and leadership roles, proud public acclaim on social media and print publications, the list goes on. All those practices put the spotlight for high achievement where it rightly belongs, on the child. Discounted tuition may be a nice benefit for their parents, but I am not sure that all our other full fee-paying families would see the worth.

Conversely, I already know that the vast majority of the St Leonard’s community strongly support an investment into scholarships that allow young people from more challenging backgrounds to access an education that would otherwise be well out of their reach. Our Global Citizen Scholarships offer life-changing opportunities for refugees who have recently arrived in Melbourne. Our Indigenous Scholarships honour our commitment to bettering the future of Australia’s First Nations peoples. And our Leonardian Scholarships open a gateway to any students who face ongoing family difficulties or other life circumstances which have prevented them from achieving their best. These are scholarships in the proper sense of the word, assistance aimed at creating otherwise unattainable opportunities.

The other advantage of investing financial aid in young people who need it, is the power of the multiplier effect. The beauty of social equity scholarships is that they don’t just benefit the initial recipient. It is very common for our scholarship holders to go on to live a life dedicated to serving others, grateful for the initial advantage their educational opportunity gave them. Meaning that their friends, families, and local communities also benefit from the quality of their early education. Scholarships like these are a potent way of paying it forward, and another practical Leonardian example of ‘an education for life.’

The multiplier works internally as well. We talk a lot about social justice in the College, but experience always trumps rhetoric. The chance for students from more comfortable backgrounds to learn and play alongside others who face greater challenges than themselves grounds them in real-world experiences, fostering empathy and understanding. That said, scholarship recipients must also be allowed to blend in naturally with their peers, without too much fanfare. Whilst their presence may be a point of pride for the College, singling them out for undue attention or expecting them to be ambassadors for the school or their community, can undo the whole point of the award, which is to give them the same experience as most other young people enjoy.

And so, my dip into the dusty pages of the OED gives me confidence that our approach to scholarships is true to spirit. We are not a professional sports club, nor the producers of The Chase television show – we don’t need to buy in talent. Plenty of outstanding students present themselves for enrolment here every year, but we are equally happy to play the cards we are dealt. A glance at the value-added data by the time our students reach Senior School suggests that we do very well in identifying and nurturing talent in all its forms. And throughout their journey, student success is feted at every turn. Families who choose St Leonard’s do so in the knowledge that recognition of their children’s successes will occur where it matters most, in their child’s own self-esteem and in the eyes of their peers, rather than the bank accounts of their parents.

However other schools may choose to subsidise fees, St Leonard’s College stands proud in its future commitment to channel the entirety of our scholarship fund into opening doors to those for whom a St Leonard’s education would otherwise be an impossibility.

**scholarship**  
an amount of money  
given by a school, college,  
university, or other  
organisation to pay  
for the studies of  
a person with great ability  
but little money.

*Through the support of current parents, the generosity of donors, the fundraising activities of the Foundation, and the charitable arm of The Amiel Society, our priorities remain “the studies of a person with great ability but little money.”*

Perhaps the last word should go to my trusty dictionary. For, despite my concerns that scholarship funds are becoming misdirected these days, it seems that is not a new phenomenon. The OED records the first written usage of the word “scholarship” came from the pen of one ‘H. Gilbert, of Queen Elizabeth’s Academy,’ who cautioned in 1583:

“And also the other universities shall then better suffice to relieve poor scholars, where now the youth of nobility and gentlemen are taking up their scholarships, thus disappointing the poor of their livings and advancements.”

Perhaps it was ever thus?