

**OCCASIONAL ADDRESS TO GRADUATING STUDENTS  
SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF NURSING  
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**By Professor Colleen Cartwright**

Congratulations to all of you for having completed your degree. This is a big achievement and I know how much hard work and sacrifice it takes to get to this point.

Many of you, I know, have families who have also had to make sacrifices so you could reach this point in your career, and for some of you, you are the first person in your family to complete a University degree, as I was in my family.

I urge you not to take your degree lightly or underestimate what it means to have had the opportunity to go to university in the first place. Tertiary education has not always been readily available to everyone in this country.

Given the recent death of former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, it is timely to remember that for many years in Australia, a university education was only available to the privileged few: those whose parents could afford to pay the required fees or, at the very least, support their sons (and less often, their daughters) to stay at school to Year 12 or the equivalent. Then, if they were exceptionally gifted, they might win one of the small number of Commonwealth Government University scholarships. The result was that both bright and average students of wealthy families and a small number of gifted students from less wealthy families received a university education. This, of course, was to the detriment of Australia. It did not harness the talents and skills of all the brightest and best. That situation changed when Gough Whitlam introduced free University education.

I was one of the beneficiaries of that change; growing up as the 4<sup>th</sup> child of a labourer with a sick wife and 5 children, there was no possibility of me going to University. I left school at 15 and started work – and was often asked “What are you going to do until you get married dear?” Well, I did get married, at 19, had 3 children in 3 years – including one who was a cot-death baby at 6 weeks – and when I was 34 I found myself a single mother with two young children. At that point someone opened a door for me that changed my life; Dr David Cubbin was Head of the School of Arts at what was then Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education and although I did not have my HSC he gave me special entry to do an Associate Diploma in Arts, majoring in drama. Because of Gough Whitlam I did not have to pay fees up-front. I continued to study for 20 years – through an Honours degree in Social Work, a Master of Public Health and then a PhD, which was awarded when I was 61. Both my children have also completed University degrees and my daughter also has completed her Master of Education degree.

I know that visionaries and idealists such as Gough Whitlam are not always economic rationalists. A family member recently said that free university education was unsustainable and I realise that it was the Hawke/Keating government that introduced the HECS system to help make it sustainable. However, as another family member pointed out, that is really a debate we haven't properly had in this country. If some of the big multi-national companies that make considerable profits from their operation in Australia, including some of our biggest banks, paid their fair share of taxes, we could not only provide free university education but we could ensure that our health and disability services are also well supported and maintained.

But I fear that what was gained almost 40 years ago may now be under threat and I ask you to commit yourselves to fighting to ensure that we don't return to the “bad old days” of privileged education. It is a privilege to go to University, but it is a privilege that should be available to any Australian, on merit, and not

just to a privileged few by reason of birth or social status. Neither do we want to become like America, where some students end their studies with a lifetime of crippling debt. We can do better than that in Australia. And remember to open doors for others when the opportunity arises – you don't know where that may lead them.

On the subject of doing better – you are all graduating from a Nursing Degree and you are inheriting a long tradition of care and compassion for those who are ill or frail. For the last 22 years I have been committed to improving the end of life for people in Australia, and improving the quality of life for all older Australians. Part of that has been working to make Advance Care Planning a routine part of nursing and medical practice, so that people can express their wishes for what care and treatment they want – and perhaps more importantly, that they do not want – at the end stage of their lives and to have the comfort and reassurance that those wishes will be respected. While I'm happy to report that every State and Territory in Australia now has Advance Care Planning legislation, the reality is that end-of-life care is still not very good in many hospitals and residential aged care facilities. In particular, terminally ill people are still being deprived of adequate pain relief – and that is a human rights abuse – or they continue to be given invasive, unwanted treatments that do nothing more than prolong their dying. Giving adequate pain relief, even if it hastens death, is not euthanasia. Neither is withholding or withdrawing futile life-support systems.

So as I approach the end of my career I want to pass the baton to you, so you can continue the campaign to make the end of life the best it can be for everyone. A mark of a civilized society is how well we care for our more vulnerable members. For me, when older people not only live well but also die well, we can claim success.

Again, my congratulations, and I hope you are all now going to celebrate this wonderful achievement.