

Honorary Doctorate Address UC

Dr Wendy McCarthy
22nd September 2026

Good afternoon Chancellor Paul, Vice Chancellor Shorten, Dr Smith, Graduates and their families and friends.

Thank you for your invitation and the opportunity to honour the award. It is a special joy to be with you this afternoon.

Graduation ceremonies are very particular moments in the life of a University. They are such happy events and on my counting I worked out I have presided over 80 but this is my first as an occasional speaker.

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, and recognise other people and families with connection to the lands of the ACT and surrounding region.

I also pay my respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge their continuing culture and contribution to this city and region.

My story begins in Orange, where I was born during the war.

My parents were very young. Neither had completed secondary school, and our family circumstances were often financially difficult.

However, they were voracious readers, and they were determined that their children would be educated.

That determination shaped my life.

My first 7 years were spent in Orange where I had two years of pre school education and acquired two siblings. My father won a ballot for farming and grazing land near Garema, in Western NSW, a small railway siding village, where I attended a one-teacher school of about 25 children.

There is no need to feel sorry for me.

It was, in many respects, a wonderful childhood.

I rode my pony or bicycle three miles to school. I listened to ABC radio. I read constantly. I helped look after the younger children.

Most of the time, I was the only child in my class, which meant that I generally came first and received significant individual attention.

Nobody thought to ask how many pupils were in the class.

That experience gave me an early sense of confidence, responsibility and independence.

Then I went to high school, and everything changed.

I was eleven and I had to leave home and become a boarder at an Anglican hostel in order to attend Forbes High School. I was no longer top of the class. I was not prepared for mathematics or science, and I had considerable catching up to do.

In many ways, I had to reinvent myself.

This is the first idea I would like to leave with you.

You are shaped by your circumstances, but you are not confined by them.

You can learn.

You can change and adapt.

You can become someone you did not yet know you were capable of becoming.

I could never have imagined my life.

When my family lost the farm, we moved to northern NSW, and I completed my final year of school boarding with a family and attending Tamworth High School.

I moved from a class of 14 to a class of 75.

Once again, I had to reset and learn to stand up for myself.

I found myself resisting the suggestion that I should abandon combined physics and chemistry because I was the only girl in the class and it would apparently be difficult for the teacher to manage.

I failed to see why. I was determined to stay and within a week another girl joined me and together we moved to the top of the class.

There are moments in life when being told that something is not for you becomes a powerful reason to pursue it and ask why.

My Tamworth teachers and career advisors encouraged my parents to consider university for me.

This was unfamiliar territory, nobody in our family had ever been before me.

The extended family rallied around.

A relative offered to act as guarantor despite having no money and my teachers encouraged me to apply for scholarships. I won both Commonwealth and Secondary Teacher's Scholarships. I accepted the teacher's one which gave me both a living allowance and a guaranteed career at the end of it.

Aged 16, I arrived at the University of New England, financially self sufficient and it felt like coming home.

I loved university life.

I loved the sense of community on campus, the intellectual challenge, the sporting arena and the performing arts.

In my Dip Ed year I became part of the leadership tutor group in Duval College. It was the beginning of becoming a mentor, something I have practised throughout my life and career. To be a mentor is an intellectual gift of kindness.

Sometimes another person can see potential in you before you are able to see it in yourself. I was that person.

At 20, I left New England, ready for my first teaching assignment which was Cremorne Girls High in Sydney.

I knew I had found my vocation. I still think of myself as a teacher, I just work in different classrooms.

After three years of teaching, I married Gordon McCarthy. We worked in London and Pittsburgh for the next three years. We roamed the world and became world citizens, open to new ideas and beginning to see ourselves as part of a bigger world. Travel broadened our relationships, our knowledge, our curiosity and our confidence.

On our return to Sydney, newly pregnant I joined my first activist group, the Childbirth Education Association which lobbied for fathers to be present at the birth of their child. It was my first personal, political response and one I remain proud of today. It has informed my social activism.

My experience as a new mother exposed me to the systemic barriers confronting women in the workforce. We were a new cohort of university educated women who wanted to be mothers and workers.

Suddenly Australia seemed a long way behind. I found other women who thought like me and together we formed the Women's Electoral Lobby, which remains a significant political lobby today.

It taught me feminist theory and practice.

Never stop learning.

What I have learned from a lifetime of activism and advocacy...

Say yes to opportunity.

If someone you respect asks you to do something worthwhile, do not be too quick to explain why you are not ready.

Do not assume that everyone else is better prepared than you are.

And do not spend so long preparing yourself for an opportunity that the opportunity passes.

One of the clearest examples in my own life came when the New South Wales Education Minister, Paul Landa, telephoned and asked me to join the Higher Education Board.

My first instinct was to explain why I might not yet be sufficiently qualified.

He interrupted me. He reminded me that I and the women I worked with had spent a great deal of time pressing for change from outside the system, and he was now offering me the opportunity to come inside and help make those changes.

He said I had 24 hours to consider it.

I said yes.

I joined a board of 17 men who, at the time, were responsible for all higher education in NSW. They had both influence and power.

That opportunity led to many others.

It took me from arguing for change from outside institutions to helping shape them from within.

My advice, say yes to opportunity...think about it later.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of serving in leadership and governance roles across education, health, broadcasting, heritage and mental health.

I have learned that leadership is everybody's business and to play an active part in it you have an obligation to use influence well.

So much public life depends on trust and influence.

Can people trust you to be fair?

Can they trust you to listen?

Can they trust that you are there to do the work, rather than simply to enhance your own standing?

I have worked with governments of different political persuasions because I have never believed that public service should be about personal enrichment or ideological loyalty.

It is about being trusted to do the task in front of you as well and as fairly as you can.

If you are fortunate enough to receive public recognition, that creates a social contract of reciprocity.

I am now 85 and loving my life. Age brings wisdom and new insight. I have never stopped learning.

Sadly I have learned that social progress is not self-sustaining. It needs nurturing and continuous commitment.

Every generation has to understand what came before it, protect what has been achieved, and be prepared to make the next change.

Rights can be won.

They can also be forgotten.

They can be contested.

And sometimes they have to be won again.

That is one of the reasons that universities matter in our social and intellectual infrastructure. To preserve and expand knowledge and to preserve memory.

If one day you find yourself at the head of an institution, remember that reaching the top is not, in itself, the achievement.

What matters is what you do with the authority and trust once you have it.

Be brave enough to challenge what should be challenged, and wise enough to protect what is worth preserving.

In a world of rapidly changing technology, like AI, lean in and work with it but when you make the major decisions in your life remember it is humanity that matters.

Always remember to keep your head and heart connected.

Graduates I have offered my past life and learning to you.

The future is yours.

Go for it.

Thank you.