

**Address to the Graduation Ceremony  
Canberra Institute of Technology**

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**'Skill'**

I am delighted to be here tonight, and to have been given the great honour of delivering the Occasional Address. I pay tribute to all of you who have received awards, and I pay tribute to all those you helped you to achieve a successful outcome — your teachers, your parents, partners, children, siblings, friends — the whole tribe who make it possible for people to study effectively. Teaching and learning are social activities, not just in the sense of a face-to-face context, but also in the sense that what we learn, and how we learn it, and who helps us to learn, are all activities which require and depend on other people. I hope that the support group for each of you gets the thanks that it deserves. And I hope that you all recognise that you have won your awards from the best institution of its kind in Australia — the Canberra Institute of Technology, with whom we at the University of Canberra are proud to be associated as partners.

My theme for tonight ought to be familiar enough for the graduates. It is 'skill'. All of you are getting awards for having mastered certain skills, and those awards and the skills you now are formally said to possess will help you along your career path, or help you to do something that you want to do. And along with the awards and the skills comes another supremely important quality that is connected to it, and that is self-confidence. It is a good self-confidence, the one based on skill, because personal skills become deeper and better through use, and as they do, so do we become more confident about ourselves as people, because in our society one crucial question is 'What can you do?' — and to be able to do things that demand skill is a great source of respect from others.

I want to ask you to consider that you will need to go through this process of acquiring skills again and again, and that as you do so your sense of confidence and the respect with which you are held by others will continue to grow. I don't just meaning the acquisition of new work-related skills, though that is very important — and you will need to acquire them many times in the course of your career. All Australians now entering the workforce will find that is true: we have entered a world of 'life-long learning', because the speed with which new technologies are becoming available means that our skill base has to be continually widened. To put it another way: many of the jobs that you will be doing in fifteen years time do not presently exist. By the time that they do, you will have had to learn the appropriate skills.

I'm actually thinking more widely than the world of work. There are other skills that need to be acquired so that our non-working life can be enjoyable and fulfilling, too. One is the skill of citizenship. There are no awards for it, but it is crucial if our society is to flourish. How do we get that set of skills? They come through regarding our society as something that we help to

produce rather than as something that we consume. They come through taking part in community organisations, by working for some common goal, by keeping an eye on what is going on in our community, by reading the papers, by speaking up when something is being done which you think is wrong. I would like there to be a course in citizenship, and I am sure that CIT would do it very well. And it is surely something that everybody should do before they are awarded their vote. Not enough Australians have these skills, and if anything the number is declining. Please make the skill of citizenship one of yours. Our country needs self-confident citizens, because they are likely to make decisions for the common good, rather than in the selfish direction of 'what's best for me'.

Another greatly needed skill is the skill of love and marriage. It has to be true that there's not much of this skill about in Australia. Two thirds of our marriages end in divorce, and part of the reason surely is that too many of us regard love and marriage, like citizenship, as something which is there to consume rather than something that we have to help to produce. You have no doubt sometimes wondered why, as a society, we insist on qualifications for work, for driving a car, for flying a plane, for opening a bank account, but that we don't ask for any qualifications before people marry.

Yet it would be easy enough to design a course — and again I am sure that CIT would do it very well! — a course which prepared people for living together, which got them used to the idea that co-operation, trust, love, sharing and the rest all have to be worked at, and which gave them the self-confidence they would need when things weren't going so well in the relationship, which happens to all couples. We do need skilled and self-confident couples, and I hope that you will see these skills as absolutely essential for you. I haven't said anything about sex, but any reading of newspapers and the popular magazines will make clear that there is not a lot of self-confidence in this area either, on the part of men or women. I wish it were otherwise, but I will spare the blushes of the staff of CIT by not suggesting to you that they could put on excellent courses in this area as well.

The third great skill which gives you self-confidence is the skill of parenting. Once again, there are no pre-conditions, no qualifications, no awards, in the field of parenting. All you have to do is to produce a baby, and as many people find out to their dismay, this can be absurdly easy. Yet of all the skills a good society needs, the skill of good parenting has to be at the very top. So many of our troubles as a society seem to start with bad parenting — emotional and other neglect of children, child abuse, discouragement rather than encouragement, a lack of love in the home, and so on. These private inadequacies later on produce public evils, such as assault and murder, and also lead to an awful cycle where the abuses suffered in childhood are then perpetrated onto the children of the next generation.

Now there are in fact courses about good parenting, though they are not quite called that, and both CIT and my University run them. They are courses intended for child-care and early childhood teachers. Since a daughter of mine has been a student both here and at UC in the early childhood area, I know how valuable some of her education has been, and since she is also a mother of a young child, I know that what she has learned she can put into practice, not just as a teacher but also as a parent. I wish that

these courses were seen as a necessary preparation for parenthood. Can I ask you all to regard being a good parent as one of the greatest skills you will ever acquire? And self-confidence is attached to it: while the first child is an awesome responsibility, the later ones are less of a hassle because we have learned quite a lot from coping with number one.

The point about these non-work skills is that working at them, mastering them, taking them seriously as good things in themselves and deserving of time and energy — this effort is rewarded with the same kind of self-confidence and respect that come from learning a trade, mastering a technique, solving a puzzle. We human beings need to work, and to be good at work; something in us responds very well to the challenges of work and the use of our skill — that is, among other things, why unemployment is such a disaster for a society. What I am asking you to think about is that the same kinds of challenges, the same kinds of skills and the same kinds of rewards are there in our private lives, as citizens, lovers and parents, and that our society gains enormously if we are as good at these things as we are at our work. To do that requires gaining other kinds of skill.

As the motor car advertisement says: 'Please consider'. My congratulations, once again, to you all. You have certainly earned them.