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Emerging issues
in education –
hopes and challenges

Gonski to deliver
Jean Blackburn's
oration

NEW:
Young teachers
have their say

professional EDUCATOR



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Education in 2014 – where are we heading?



It is a great honour for me to assume the leadership of the Australian College of Educators. I have been actively involved with the College since 1989 in a variety of capacities and firmly believe the College has a crucial role to play in the current and future context of education.

It is fair to say that the College and education generally in Australia are at crucial points in their respective histories. In education we have seen mounting criticism, often ill-informed, and the talking up of a 'crisis' in education. There has been a measure of panic over slippage on international measures of student achievement and we have seen simplistic solutions to the so-called problems of education promulgated by economists, the corporate sector and various policy advisers.¹ Measures which have been unsuccessful elsewhere are being advocated and introduced, including for-profit, government funded, independent schools and academies, the appointment of people without teaching qualifications to principal positions, shifting teacher education away from universities and into schools, greater involvement of international educational publishers and various schemes to allow non-teachers to work in schools. There has been a combination of 'carrots', for example so-called merit pay, and 'sticks', including sacking poorly performing teachers naively advocated. The fact that these measures have not been successful anywhere has not deterred people from pushing for them.

A long-term vision or plan for education is lacking and we continue to be plagued by problems caused by the state and territory versus Commonwealth financial and educational decision-making divide. An equitable method of funding schools remains elusive and contested.

This edition of *Professional Educator* explores this context, what is needed and what seems to be emerging as educational policy unfolds under the new federal government and in the other jurisdictions. As well as resolving funding arrangements, the issue of teacher quality is sure to figure prominently. There will be yet more reviews of teacher education and means to attract, develop and retain outstanding teacher candidates will again be debated. It will be important to monitor the continued implementation of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and associated initiatives such as certification of teachers at the highly accomplished and lead levels. Performance and development of teachers under the new framework will come under scrutiny.

At this time and in this context Australian education badly needs a well-informed, authoritative voice for the profession to speak from a position of evidence and experience. The College's membership is our greatest asset and we need to draw upon this capable and experienced cohort of members and fellows to critique and influence educational policy and direction.

At this point I would like to pay tribute to Professor Bob Lingard, national president and chair of the ACE Board for the period 2012-2013. Bob and I joined the board at the same time in January 2012 and little did we know how challenging the next two years would be. There were difficult times as the board restructured the national office and attempted to put right the finances of the College.

I'm pleased to report we now have a highly-effective national office well run under the leadership of Catherine Pickett. We face challenges of course, both in terms of influencing education policy as noted above and in ensuring the continued financial viability of the College. Like many professional associations, membership attraction and retention

are crucial. To be influential and to offer service to our members we need to be financially secure, however we won't be unless we attract and retain our members; an important dynamic.

I will say more about this later, however in 2014 we will be issuing a challenge to our members and fellows, if each of us can attract just one new member this will revitalise the College and ensure our financial viability, which in turn means we can do more for our members and the profession as well as become more influential. I'm sure that each of us can identify one potential member who can offer the College the benefit of their experience and expertise.

Education in Australia badly needs a voice which is non-partisan, experienced, informed and broadly representative of the profession. ACE is ideally placed to fulfil this role.

On other exciting news emanating from our national office, I am very pleased to provide an update on our ITMS project to redevelop the College IT system. The ITMS Committee that was formed last year, chaired by our experienced member Gerry White has been charging forward and making excellent progress with the task at hand. The redevelopment of our ITMS is not an easy job, but one that requires a high-level of sophisticated and constantly changing technological and web-based expertise and experience. This week we have continued to work through the tender process to select a new provider and we will be submitting our recommendation to the board by the end of the month. Once we have completed the contractual side of this project, steady progress will continue; please stay tuned.

I wish each of you a satisfying and productive year and I hope you can find the time to assist the College in its endeavours and in turn receive the benefits that an ACE membership can bestow.

**Professor Stephen Dinham OAM PhD
FACE FACEA FAIM
National President**

¹ Dinham, S. (2013). 'The Quality Teaching Movement in Australia Encounters Difficult Terrain: A Personal Perspective', *Australian Journal of Education*, 57(2), pp. 91-106.

Putting school students first



EDUCATION MINISTER CHRISTOPHER PYNE

I am delighted to write for *Professional Educator* early in my term as minister for education. I wish all readers a happy and productive new year, knowing we share a common goal of giving Australia's students a quality education.

As 2014 begins, I am excited by the enormous opportunity we have to improve school education. I'm also proud that some of our most capable individuals take on the great privilege—and very hard work—of educating our next generation.

So it is disappointing that the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results released late last year show the nation's academic performance is slipping since the 2009 test. Based on our raw mean score, we dropped from 15th to 19th in mathematical literacy, 10th to 16th in scientific literacy and 9th to 14th in reading literacy.

We shouldn't panic because of these results. Knee jerk responses and policy announcements made on the run are not the answer. Instead, the Abbott government will take a calm and methodical approach. We will work closely with state and territory authorities and other education partners, including the Australian College of Educators, to give all Australian students choice and diversity on their way to a high-quality education. We won't, however, be dictating how schools should be run because we recognise that is the role of education authorities, parents, teachers and principals.

Early in January, I launched the government's Students First education reforms. This is the framework which will support our education policy initiatives in 2014 and beyond. I have felt for some time that the robust education debate we have in Australia means we sometimes lose sight of our common goal of improving school education outcomes by putting students first.

While stable and certain funding levels for schools is essential, it is important that we acknowledge that increasing funding should never be an end in itself. Countries that spend a high proportion of their GDP on education do not automatically produce high-performing education systems.

Rather than simply talk about funding, I want a national education debate which focuses on improving outcomes for students through the policies which we know will make the biggest difference

– teacher quality, school autonomy, parental engagement and a robust curriculum.

At the heart of our Students First package is lifting the quality, professionalism and status of the teaching profession.

We are establishing an expert panel to provide advice on how teacher education programmes could be improved to better prepare new teachers with the practical skills needed for modern classrooms.

The advisory group will work to identify world's best practice in teacher education programmes, particularly focussing on pedagogical approaches, subject content and teaching practice.

On principal autonomy, schools in all states and territories have been moving towards more autonomous and independent models to improve education outcomes and student results.

Research shows that in highly effective schools, principals are in constant and meaningful communication with the school community and students perform better when schools have the freedom to make process and personnel decisions at a local level.

Our \$70 million Independent Public Schools initiative responds to the growing demand for greater school autonomy and flexibility.

“ We are establishing an expert panel to provide advice on how teacher education programmes could be improved to better prepare new teachers with the practical skills needed for modern classrooms. ”

We want to help schools work with parents and their communities to make local decisions and respond to issues that affect the learning outcomes of their students.

Working with the states and territories, we will encourage up to 1500 existing public schools to become Independent Public Schools by 2017.

There's a wealth of research showing that the earlier parents show an interest in a child's education, the more positive the effect on student performance, school attendance and student wellbeing. There is particular value in parents providing positive support and encouragement for their child's learning.

The start of the 2014 school year is the perfect time for parents to get involved and actively engaged in their children's education.

The fourth pillar in our approach to school education is strengthening the curriculum.

A robust, relevant and up-to-date national curriculum is essential to improve the quality of education for all school students.

The federal government wants a curriculum that delivers what students need for their future, what parents want and what the nation requires in our increasingly competitive and globalised world.

It must be both content-rich and, importantly, focus on the 21st century skills of critical thinking, team work, problem solving, creativity, analytic reasoning and communication.

Working with the state and territory governments, the Howard government got the ball rolling. The previous government continued this work and now it is timely to review the content of the curriculum to take into account the many views expressed so far.

That's why I have appointed Professor Ken Wiltshire AO and Dr Kevin Donnelly to review the curriculum so we develop and implement one that is on par with the world's best.

Between them, Professor Wiltshire and Dr Donnelly have enormous experience in education and improving the performance of educational systems. They will examine the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian curriculum, and evaluate both the process of its development and the content.

I have asked them to gather the views of parents, state and territory governments and educators to inform their analysis.



I'll be having more to say on each of these four areas in the weeks and months ahead.

In the meantime, I encourage you to visit www.studentsfirst.gov.au to keep up to date with developments as we chart a new course to improve school education in Australia.

Professional Educator encourages all readers of the magazine to have 'your say' on this article and others in this first edition for the year. Please email ace@austcolled.com.au.

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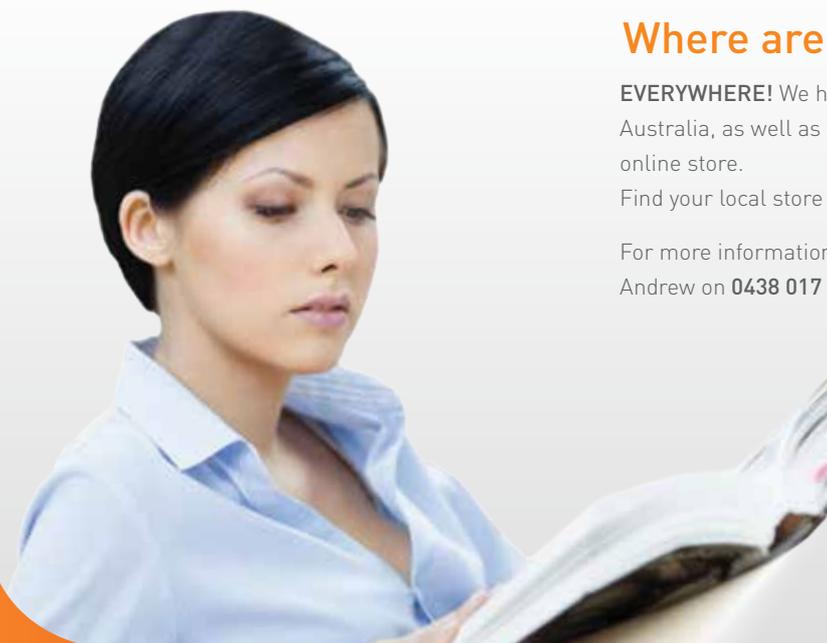
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Q & A

with **Pam Christie**
 Managing Director
 of TAFE NSW

It is now widely-recognised that Australia needs a more highly-skilled workforce to remain competitive. This is great news for the TAFE sector because more than ever the business of skilling is relevant and recognised as a high priority by governments, industry and individuals.

PE: What do you think are the top three issues facing educators in the TAFE sector at the moment?

PC: The TAFE sector is facing more competition than we have ever seen before as our students now have greater choice. As well as competing with private and community training providers, the TAFE sector is also increasingly competing with universities following the uncapping of undergraduate higher education places.

Another key issue facing educators in the TAFE sector is the demand for more customised services. Students want more personalised services and greater flexibility in how, when and where training is delivered. Industry wants solutions delivered in the workplace and to their unique business requirements. We have

seen a significant growth in demand for flexible delivery modes, including on line and mixed delivery modes. We have also seen increased demand for workplace delivery, multiple course start times throughout the year and recognition of prior learning.

PE: What is challenging the VET/TAFE sector at present, and how easy is it to solve?

PC: The constraint on governments' spending in vocational education and training (VET) at a time when competition is increasing is definitely a challenge. But the TAFE sector is resilient and over time has grown its commercial capability and reduced its reliance on government funding. I see this trend continuing into the future. ▶



The TAFE sector prides itself on its reputation for quality and setting the benchmark for the vocational sector. However, with pressure on resources this can be challenging. The increased contestability in the VET sector has resulted in poor practices by some providers. These compete in the market with TAFE and have damaged the reputation of the sector as a whole, impacting on high-quality private and public providers.

As student and employer needs are changing, another challenge is greater need for rapid and localised responses, and for training which utilises new technology. Being able to operate efficiently and still innovate and invest in new systems, technologies and staff capability is an ongoing challenge.

PE: Can you explain the recent government policy and state funding models that are affecting the TAFE sector?

PC: Over recent years, the TAFE sector across Australia has seen unprecedented change with the implementation of the Council of Australian Government (COAG) skills reform agenda. Through COAG, all governments have committed to provide students with a training 'entitlement' at least to Certificate III level qualifications. This is designed to increase competition. Additionally, COAG is expanding student access to income contingent loans for students to pay potentially higher fees.

The COAG skill reforms are being introduced in NSW through a policy known as Smart and Skilled which is being implemented in a staged approach from 2014. A list of the specific qualifications that will be eligible for government 'entitlement' subsidies has been released. In NSW, from January 2015, eligible students will have more choice over their training provider as well as access to a government subsidised place for qualifications up to Certificate III level.

Visit www.training.nsw.gov.au/smartandskilled/index.html for detailed information on the Smart and Skilled reforms.

PE: Do you think that the TAFE sector in NSW will follow the process that happened in Victoria in 1992? If so what are the similarities and differences?

PC: All states and territories signed the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform, but each has taken a different approach to reforming their vocational education and training sectors.

Only time will tell the full impact of the reforms. However, NSW has taken a more staged approach to the reforms. For example, unlike some other jurisdictions, the NSW entitlement is initially only for qualifications up to Certificate III level and places at higher levels are capped.

Another key difference in NSW is the release of the government's Statement of Owner Expectations which sets out TAFE's role as the public provider and its key reform directions and accountabilities. The Statement of Owner Expectations states that TAFE NSW is expected to:

- be a statewide service
- offer a broad choice of courses
- provide inclusive services
- deliver skills critical to the NSW economy
- lead quality, innovation and customer focus in service delivery
- operate as a sustainable business
- be an employer of choice.



“ All states and territories signed the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform, but each has taken a different approach to reforming their vocational education and training sectors. ”

The statement makes it clear that TAFE is to provide stability in the NSW training market. Visit www.tafensw.edu.au/about/soe.htm to view the Statement of Owner Expectations.

PE: What are some of the conversations being had within the TAFE workforce about the professional standing of the educators who work in this space?

PC: The professionalism of the TAFE workforce is certainly one of our points of difference compared with the VET sector generally.

In 2013, the TAFE NSW Commission board undertook a statewide consultation - Let's talk about TAFE. Community and industry stakeholders were surveyed and feedback indicated that one of the things most valued by stakeholders was the commitment and professionalism of teachers as well as the quality of training and its relevance to the workplace. Employers in particular chose TAFE to provide training for their employees because it has a reputation for delivering consistent, quality training which leads to recognised qualifications.

In addition to this, conversations about maintaining the high professional standing of the educators working in the TAFE space revolve around the need to:

- maintain industry currency for teachers
- increase the delivery of courses in workplaces and to enterprises
- upskill in order to meet the needs of diverse learner groups for example providing language and literacy, numeracy support for learners
- deliver courses through a wide range of delivery modes, involving the mastery of a range of e-tools/technologies
- ensure consistency and reliability of assessment outcomes
- improve learner outcomes including completion levels.

PE: What do you think will happen to this sector moving forward?

PC: TAFE has a long and successful history and has constantly evolved to support the changing needs of industry and the economy for over a century.

We are seeing unprecedented change in our environment at the moment and the TAFE sector is responding positively to this change.

TAFE NSW anticipates that continual renewal is required to keep pace with global economic changes. We are evaluating all our services to ensure they meet changing needs and add value to services for individuals, industry, community and the economy.

TAFE continues to be more commercial and customer-focused. Links to employment, enterprises, universities and schools are also being strengthened. I also think we will see a continuation of the trend for TAFE Institutes to offer degree programs.

PE: What would assist the TAFE sector in gaining a stronger national agenda, more to the point how can the states assist this?

PC: TAFE has a national focus through TAFE Directors Australia, which is a key stakeholder in national discussions.

The states can emphasise the importance of their TAFEs by explicitly outlining government's unique expectations, such as has been done in NSW.

We also need strong advocates for TAFE so we can tell the story about how it is changing people's lives every day and helping businesses and communities thrive.

PE: How are overseas agendas affecting the TAFE space here in Australia?

PC: Global competition means we need to connect our business internationally so that our students and enterprise customers remain competitive.

Many countries, including in Asia, are building or enhancing their VET systems and are looking to the TAFE sector to assist that development, through onshore and offshore partnerships.

In addition, the TAFE sector has a growing number of international students seeking to develop their skills; including international students looking to TAFE as a pathway to higher education.

PE: What are the top issues facing TAFE students?

PC: Increased contestability means that students need better information to make an informed choice in a very complex market place.

All TAFEs are improving their marketing efforts so that current and future students are aware of the benefits of training with a TAFE Institute.

Fee increases across the VET and tertiary sectors are also an issue for students. Access to income contingent loans is expanding, particularly for higher level qualifications, which is making some courses more accessible.

Market research in the TAFE sector demonstrates that smaller class sizes, practical hands on training and teachers with strong links to industry are highly valued by TAFE students.

PE: Is teacher quality a topic that is affecting the TAFE space, if so/or not what are some of the other topics that are affecting the space?

PC: Quality teaching is an area of ongoing international interest in all sectors of education including the TAFE sector.

“ *...the TAFE sector has a growing number of international students seeking to develop their skills; including international students looking to a pathway to higher education.* ”

The Let's talk about TAFE consultation undertaken by TAFE NSW confirmed overwhelming support for the value of TAFE and that a significant source of competitive advantage for TAFE is the superior quality of its teaching and learning.

When asked why they chose TAFE NSW, 69 per cent of respondents chose 'quality teaching' as the reason and 68 per cent chose the 'quality of teachers' as the reason.

As TAFE moves into an era of even greater contestability and competition, maintaining our quality brand and reputation will be critical for our future success.

PE: Thanks very much Pam for your knowledgeable answers, I wish you all the best for 2014.

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What will 2014 mean for Early Childhood Education?

ELAINE BLAKE AND JENNY JAY



The Australian federal government's agenda to provide every child with an opportunity for the best early education experience has seen the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector undergo substantial and complex restructuring during the past six years.

The 2007 Labor government's productivity agenda included a commitment to increase investment in social and human capital to strengthen the economy and included reforms targeting ECEC, in line with the direction of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). COAG's Melbourne Declaration highlighted 'Educational goals for young Australians' and emphasised two main goals: that schools promote equity and excellence; and that all young Australians become successful learners; confident and creative individuals; active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008).

To achieve these educational goals 'the responsibility of governments, school sectors and individual schools as well as parents, carers, young Australians, families, other education and training providers, business and the broader community' was required (MCEETYA, 2008, p8). With specific direction for quality ECEC, for children from birth to five years of age, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) claimed that 'children, who participate in quality early childhood education, are more likely to make a successful transition to school, stay longer at school, continue on to further education and fully participate in employment and community life as adults' (MCEETYA, 2008, p11). This original agenda and its later restructuring, is currently under review by the Productivity Commission, the federal government's independent research and advisory body.

Changes in the past decade

Demands for quality in both childcare and the early years of school became profound in Australia's recent history as an increasingly transient population of families moved between states and territories and highlighted an inconsistent approach to ECEC across the nation. Action by the federal government, through COAG, introduced the 1989 *Hobart*

Declaration on Schooling which discussed a nationally consistent approach and common entry age into Australian schools. A decade later, COAG endorsed the Adelaide Declaration: *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* that emphasised the status and quality of the teaching profession in ECE. In 2008 the Melbourne Declaration: *Educational Goals for Young Australians* refined past goals and set a nationally consistent approach to schooling in general, and direction to improve the presentation of ECEC (MCEETYA, 2008). Significant reforms include appropriate child-to-staff ratios and tertiary qualifications for ECE teachers and carers, leading to an increase in the status and quality of the teaching profession in ECEC, (see The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2010).

“ Demands for quality in both childcare and the early years of school became profound in Australia's recent history as an increasingly transient population of families moved between states and territories... ”

The commitment to improve educational outcomes for all young Australians included 'closing the gap' for Indigenous Australians, providing targeted support for disadvantaged students and sought to improve early childhood outcomes through a National Partnership Agreement. A goal of the National Partnership Agreement was to introduce universal access to quality early childhood education for all children by 2013, in the year before they attend compulsory school (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

These changes have reflected societal and global trends and directly affected the development of ECEC and the administration of early learning centres across Australia. Transformation through the federal government's agenda and COAG's National Partnership Agreement on ECEC will continue until 2020 (MCEETYA, 2009). A national legislative framework; national quality standard; national quality rating and assessment process plus a new body to provide national leadership ACECQA in promoting quality and continuous improvement were developed and implemented between 2009 and 2012.

National Quality Framework

The first National Quality Framework (NQF) for Australia, endorsed by COAG, was introduced in 2009. Within the NQF sits the National Quality Standard (NQS) which sets the standard for rating and assessment of services across seven aspects of early learning and care to ensure all Australian children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Included in the NQS is the *Early Years Learning Framework: Being Belonging and Becoming* (EYLF) which was developed to provide a strong framework for learning and development for the early years (DEEWR, 2009). To provide national leadership in promoting the expected quality and continuous improvement in ECEC, the ACECQA was established in 2012. Meanwhile, relevant sections of the Australian curriculum is also being phased into early years classrooms in school settings by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2010), and through the National Partnership's Universal Access.

NQS and national regulations for ECEC

The NQS was designed as the national benchmark with the aim of providing a high standard for accrediting the environment, educational program, quality of staff and relationships within early learning centres in order to afford

families' with a complete understanding of the distinctive and continuous quality education and care service available for their young children. From mid-2012, approved services under the guidance of ACECQA are assessed and rated by the regulatory authority of each state and territory against seven sections of the NQS:

- educational program and practice
- children's health and safety
- physical environment
- staffing arrangements
- relationships with children
- collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- leadership and service management

To help drive improvement and quality, the national law and regulations explain the overall ratings of assessment that fall into one of five levels:

- excellent
- exceeding National Quality Standard
- meeting National Quality Standard
- working towards National Quality Standard
- significant improvement required

Being, belonging and becoming

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a national framework which conveys the highest expectations for educators working with young learners. Released to guide the practices and principles of pedagogy with children from birth to five years, the EYLF acknowledges the complexities of early childhood development and the importance of children's families in their education. It accentuates expectations of educators and the value of the learning environment, play, wellbeing, transition into school and also addresses the rationale for new structures, philosophies and implications for change (DEEWR, 2009). The expectations to facilitate young children's learning are communicated through five learning outcomes:

- children have a strong sense of identity
- children are connected with and contribute to their world
- children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- children are confident and involved learners
- children are effective communicators

Universal access to 15 hours of quality ECE

The Universal Access agreement was signed in 2008, with the intent of being implemented by 2013. All states and territories agreed, through a National Partnership Agreement on early childhood with the federal government to provide 15 hours of quality schooling in the 12 months prior to full-time school for children. A commitment for the universal access program was that it be delivered by qualified early childhood educators in accordance with the national EYLF, (for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year). It was also agreed that it was presented in a way that ensured the cost would not present an access barrier for families (see Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2011 and DEEWR, 2012).

Positives and negatives

Change is renowned for causing discomfort for some, while others willingly welcome alternative models. To date the implementation of a nationally-consistent system and raising the standards of quality in the care and education for young Australians has resulted in positive and negative responses. As a result, the government agenda for ECEC is currently being reviewed.

In recognising the importance of high quality care and education, educator qualification and lower child-to-staff ratios are positive moves welcomed by the sector as this highlights the general determination that 'children should have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). However, dissatisfaction from the ECEC sector has come as a result



of crippling paperwork and costly procedures required to gain a positive assessment and rating on the NQS. In addition a change of policy commitment by the newly elected Liberal government in regards to pay increases for some ECEC workers has led to further loss of confidence within the sector.

The previous government's promise of pay rises for ECEC workers has been reneged seemingly because the offer was found to be inequitable. Insufficient funding in the Early Years Quality Funding (EYQF) failed to meet requirements to fully implement NQS and has resulted in increased pressure on services wanting to improve the quality of early learning and care. Specifically, as explained in the Ministerial Review of the Early Years Quality Fund, costs associated with placing adequately qualified persons, and the required child-to-staff ratio, could not be met from the \$300 million allocated to the EYQF (see Price Waterhouse Cooper [2013] report at http://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ministerial_review_eyqf_final_report.pdf).

An offered trade-off that will provide funding for substantial professional development in lieu of wage increases has caused a dilemma in the industry as some centres had already been promised financial support. While the redirection of funding is seen as worthy

by some (see Early Childhood Australia press release, 2013), others feel the withdrawal of financial reward to a very poorly paid workforce reflects a lack of appreciation and understanding for the important work of educators. Generally, it is agreed, that while pay levels remain at a ridiculously low level for educators it will be difficult to attract and retain high quality staff in ECEC services.

Other, more general concerns that reflect a perceived impact on ECEC as a result of the government's agenda include the ongoing push down of a formalised literacy and numeracy curriculum to the very early years in the belief this will lead to a better achievement on the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) at age 8. More attention is needed to improve the transition from the EYLF to the Australian Curriculum where understanding is required of the changing expectations of young children's learning styles need to be accommodated.

Ongoing changes

Following the latest agenda for ECEC a ministers' media centre release (28/09/2013) *Reviews to improve childcare and early childhood education commence* explained that, after reports about the procedure of the NQS being cumbersome and removing workers from their role as educators, the Productivity Commission will undertake a public inquiry into future options for ECEC (see <http://ministers.education.gov.au/ley/reviews-improve-childcare-and-early-childhood-education-commence>). The inquiry will look into all ECEC changes over the past decade and seek ways to minimise the process of determining quality standards that has caused a regulatory burden for ELC administrators.

The national approach to improve quality services in the early years recognises and supports the importance of early learning and development for the nation's youngest children and is a positive step forward for the ECEC sector.

Across the country ECEC services have welcomed and risen to the challenge of continual improvement through the quality improvement agenda. However

the overall agenda is still in danger of not being fully achieved because of a series of stops and starts as national governments have changed, policies are reviewed and funding arrangements put on hold pending the Productivity Commission enquiries. Community support for a dedicated sector working to improve services is necessary as they work towards reducing child-adult ratio, improving qualifications, providing quality learning environments and fight to increase wages.

Dr Elaine Blake has worked in early childhood education for 25 years as a teacher, school principal, teacher educator and researcher.

Associate Professor Jenny Jay has worked in the early childhood field for more than 30 years. She currently works at Curtin University and is the President of the Early Childhood Australia WA branch.

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Emerging issues in education – hopes and challenges

The state of contemporary politics in Australia has left school education in a precarious position. Despite the prominence and resources given to schooling by recent governments, the great set pieces of national reform hang in limbo. Neither NAPLAN, nor the Australian Curriculum, or the Professional Standards Framework is fully embedded, and all are too grimly technocratic to inspire enduring commitment to cultural change, and all face the uncertainty of a new government that has yet to reveal an educational vision.

Most tragically of all, the best opportunity for systemic reform in a generation – the Gonski Report – was doomed by dismal politics to the wreckage of the last unlamented Parliament. Two years and much fruitless compromise after the report's release, our state and federal politicians have ensured that school resourcing remains an opaque and inequitable shambles. And that the schooling system remains condemned to the divisive discourse of class, ideology and envy that has so long squandered educational energy in this country.

All this, of course, comes at a time when our neighbours in Asia have been undergoing profound educational revolution on an unprecedented scale. While we have been floundering over funding, the number of students enrolling ►



at universities in East Asia has been growing by an extraordinary average of 10 per cent every year and by a staggering average of almost 20 per cent per year in China alone. The consequence is an explosion in the world's educated, aspirational and professional population and a seismic shift in the planet's intellectual centre of gravity over the decades to come.

The impact of that on the future of school children will be far greater than the effect of any passing mining boom; yet we seem powerless to respond, trapped by party-political deadlock and state parochialism, in a nation where the study of Asian languages (let alone Asian history and culture) is rare and tenuous at best. Our children deserve and need far better than our leaders have delivered them; not merely so that they can lift Australia to an arbitrary position on international league tables, but so that they may flourish as individuals in the world that they are about to inherit.

Here are some of the hopes for the future – some more challenging to realise than others:

That we truly embrace a curriculum built not for the supposed distinctiveness of each state and territory, nor even for our country, but for the globalised world that is already our children's domain. We must recognise that, by the fact of their time in history and because of the access technology gives them to virtually limitless horizons our students are global citizens more than any generation before them. Our challenge is to catch up to that reality and to end the great Australian parochialism that sees the world as alien, to be visited, traded with, but ultimately hedged against; to study languages not simply for the practical benefit to doing business or going on holidays, but because they open the mind to the subtleties of intercultural and interpersonal understanding that our students will need if they're to flourish in the world beyond our suburbia; to study history, culture and the growth of science beyond the Western tradition, again not simply for pragmatic insights, but in order to comprehend how it's possible to perceive existence in ways that add depth

“ *The impact of that on the future of Australian school children will be far greater than the effect of any passing mining boom; yet we seem powerless to respond...* ”

and shading to our own experience; and in so doing to make global heritage our own.

That, despite the demise of Gonski we find a way to move past the public/private school impasse that has diminished educational discourse in Australia for decades. With no end now in sight to the gross funding inequities that have so entrenched divisions within and between school sectors, it's now up to educational leaders to build bridges and unite the teaching profession so that all Australian students may benefit from the best that each sector has to offer. That means, for example, independent schools like my own resisting the tendency to splendid isolation and committing to sustained participation in teacher training and shared professional learning as a joint investment with state and Catholic schools and with universities in creating a highly-educated, innovative and committed national teaching profession. It means exploring British and American models of hybrid independent-state schools, and it means a recognition on the part of government and unions, that parental choice and greater school autonomy, over staffing and curriculum are not by definition social evils.

That we seek to close the growing expectation, and therefore achievement gap, between girls and boys. As the father of two daughters, I am delighted that my girls will grow up in the first era of human history in which it is expected that

girls will dominate performance at every level of education from primary school to post-graduate studies. However, as the principal of a boys' school, it disturbs me that our society has so readily accepted the inevitable consequence of intellectual second best for boys. We simply cannot afford to risk the educational alienation of so large a portion of the population, or to let boys' aspirations be set by the defining boof-headery of male figures in so much Australian advertising and popular culture. One step to changing that is to redress the 4:1 bias of literacy over numeracy in NAPLAN, which does so much to exaggerate boys' apparent underperformance. Beyond that, however, it is the responsibility of all educators to ensure that every child – regardless of gender, race or background – both aspires to and achieves his or her highest potential.

I have little doubt that the calibre and commitment exists in Australian education to deliver on such hopes, despite the challenges – indeed many outstanding educators are doing so already. My remaining hope, therefore, is for the political will to match:

That progressive educational reform remains a top priority on the national agenda under the current federal government; and that governments at all levels recognise the need to stake our nation's future not just on the export of mineral resources, but on a thriving intellectual economy that will be our students' best hope of playing an active part in a world in which one third of all global graduates will come from universities in China by 2020. If we and our children are to stay relevant and prosperous in the world to come, we must be ready at least to match what we can dig up, ship and sell with what we can think, teach and create.

Justin Garrick is the head of school at Canberra Grammar School.

VET in 2014: The new federal agenda



In the lead up to the 2007 election the impending threat of skills shortages thrust the Vocational Education and Training (VET) into the front lines of electioneering. The federal coalition government had already upset the states by entering the VET domain and establishing 24 Australian Technical Colleges, and if elected in for another term, [then] Prime Minister Howard promised hundreds more across the country. In response, Labor proposed Trade Training Centres (TTCs) in every school nationwide. In the wake of Rudd's victory, the ATCs were undone, handed to the states to manage, and TTCs have been rolling out ever since.

On 17 December 2013, the new government closed the TTC programme, redirecting funding to schools in Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia; a pertinent example of the swings and roundabouts of a change of government.

In the lead up to the 2013 federal election, neither party was especially vocal on VET issues. In Brisbane, [then] Prime Minister Rudd dedicated his final policy announcement to VET in the dying hours of the campaign. At that stage, he could have paved the streets with gold and it wouldn't have mattered: the federal coalition left it to Queensland's minister for education, training & employment John Paul Langbroek to answer Rudd's announcement. VET is, after all, a state-driven sector (and there has been plenty of activity at state level right across Australia).

Since the election, we've seen federal government announcements about the Higher Education and about Schools sector, but again VET has not featured extensively. One could be forgiven for thinking that there was nothing happening, but then that would be naïve...

VET is the instrument governments employ to develop an appropriately skilled workforce. Training is a long-term—at best, medium-term—strategy to meet the demands of the skills industry and community. Understanding, and preparing for, the skills needs of the future takes foresight and investment. Blue governments traditionally devolve these responsibilities to the end user, which is unlikely to change. While it differs from state-to-state, VET has become the most commercially 'marketised' of all Australian education sectors. The Victorian model of VET market reform has seen a bulky blow

out of (state) government expenditure and a failure to create the demand characteristics of a truly functional market. In January 2014, South Australia announced a similar blow out to its own training budget for much the same reasons. States will continue to frantically grapple with the levers within their funding regimes to incentivise training activity in skills shortage areas; reasonable measures but certainly a compromise to pure market principles. With other states and territories in similar circumstances, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is likely to abandon the national entitlement model in 2014: no state or territory can afford it.



The Australian Industry Group (AIG) has recently implored the federal government to raise Australia's annual immigration intake 'with an emphasis on skilled migration in order to meet current and future skills shortages'. Given that there has been public and political discourse around skills shortages for a decade or more, perhaps we can infer that relying on industry to prepare the skills pipeline within the Australian population isn't working? Importing skills is the short-term solution to filling the skills gap and is usually discussed in relation to the mining sector. With recent shut-down announcements by manufacturers including Ford and Holden, perhaps it is not just skills we need but geographically convenient skills. In the *Mid-year Economic and Fiscal Outlook* (MYEFO) report, the government announced the 'relocation assistance to take up a job' programme to assist long term unemployed people to relocate to find employment. This initiative is blind to skills or skills acquisition.

The commonwealth house of representatives' inquiry into the role of TAFE, operations and accessibility were revived by the senate in December 2013. Having previously been aborted due to the impending federal election, it was re-introduced by greens senator Lee Rhiannon who anticipated that the inquiry 'would reveal how TAFE has been undermined as a centre for technical excellence' (*The Australian*, 12/12/13). Even if this prediction is correct, my question is how will it affect future government policy?

Under the Abbott government skills (VET), sits under the industry portfolio of Ian Macfarlane, MP. It is reasonable to expect that the sector will be treated as the rest of the portfolio, with a rationalising of government provision and the expectation that business and individuals reduce their reliance on government support. As treasurer Hockey says: 'The age of entitlement is over'. The government's National Commission of Audit will soon report back on its assessment of the role and scope of Government. VET will be subject to the same criteria as all other fields of government: required to maximise productivity and minimise red tape wherever possible.

Federal initiatives, Skills Connect and the National Workforce Development Fund are both in extended caretaker mode with an unclear future. In MYEFO the federal government announced a redirection of National Workforce and Development Fund (NWDF) funding away from the Community Services Workforce Assistance and the Enhancing High Technology Manufacturing measures.

There may also be changes to Industry Skills Councils (ISCs): it is unlikely they will be wiped out but expect some of the smaller ISCs to be consolidated to create economies of scale.

Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) will need to balance the plight to reduce red tape with the ever pressing need for thorough regulation of VET provision across more than 5000 Registered Training Organisations. ASQA will expect a structural review of its operations in 2014. Two reports by ASQA in 2013 found a host of bad behaviour by a scattering of VET providers across the country.

ASQA called on government to 'bring in new national standards for registered training organisations' (*Age*, 17 December 2013). The National Skills Standards Council (NSSC) has forwarded to minister Mcfarlane its draft standards for Licensed Training Organisations (LTCs) and Australian Vocational Qualification System Regulators (AVQSRs), in line with the NSSC Standards Policy Framework that was released in June 2013 (*NSSC Meeting Communique*, 5 December 2013).

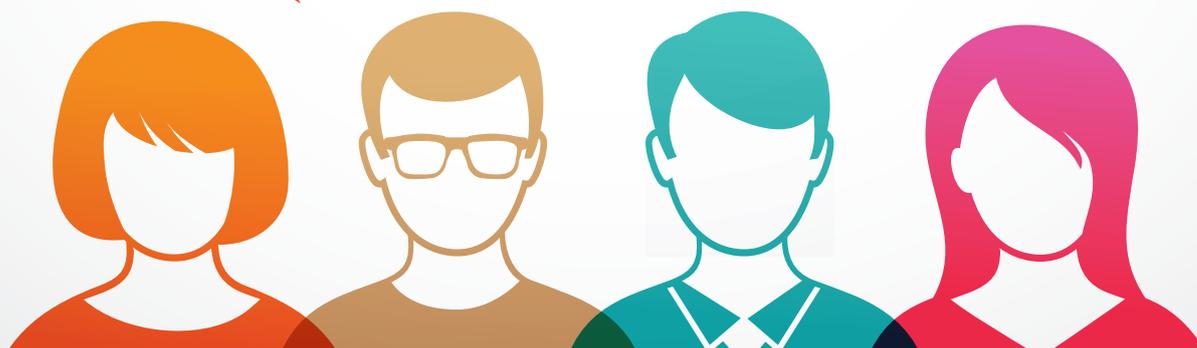
“ *It is reasonable to expect that the sector will be treated as the rest of the portfolio, with a rationalising of government provision and the expectation that business and individuals reduce their reliance on government support.* ”

Several key messages should be heeded to when considering the new federal government's agenda for VET. No more handouts to industry. Young, mature and Indigenous learners will be prioritised (MYEFO committed \$45m to the re-opening of the Indigenous Employment Programme). VET will be seen through an economic rationalist lens, and judged on its ability to reduce unemployment. It will be a critical feature of the rescue package to assist displaced workers. And it will be leaner than ever.

The VET community is waiting for the Commonwealth's National Commission of Audit announcement. Only then will we know what the future holds.

Andrew Williamson is Associate Director, VET Development at Victoria University, Melbourne.

Higher education: In need of national conversation



What to give the higher education system that appears to have almost everything? Legitimate challenges and grumbles aside, statistics and international engagements affirm that through deft positioning, Australia has indeed developed a lucky higher education system. But it would be risky to rest on successes, or not capitalise on ongoing opportunities. After briefly taking stock of the federal government's agenda for higher education, we explore policy perspectives that have the potential to yield fresh and further value for Australia, and for our higher education institutions and stakeholders.

In opposition the Coalition outlined seven broad principles and policy directions for higher education. In his early 2013 speech at the Universities Australia conference, Tony Abbott advanced his government would be 'stable and consultative', 'encourage Australian universities to protect their academic standing', help universities enhance international education exports, implement a regional bi-directional academic exchange scheme (the 'New Colombo Plan'), further encourage universities to produce world-class research, reduce universities' 'regulatory and compliance burden', and respond to new online opportunities.

A year down the track, and just over 100 days into governing, it is perhaps too early to tell how these broader intentions are playing out. The New Colombo Plan has been initiated, signalling the benefit of a Foreign Minister with a longstanding commitment to higher education and its international significance. A new part-time Commissioner has been appointed

to the national higher education regulator to encourage a more 'consultative approach'. A review of the student-driven funding system has been commissioned and Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne has affirmed the government's commitment to an excellent and diverse higher education and research system. Doubtless, challenging work is underway to align ever-tightening funding with policy priorities. The mid-May budget may yield a clearer picture of policy specifics. Higher education is a large part of Australia and government spending, and broader policy dynamics—including the National Commission of Audit—will impact as well.

But how do we create engaging and diverse forms of excellence? How can the government sustain Robert Menzies' 'passionate belief in pure learning'? As the Prime Minister noted in 2013 while in opposition, Australia punches above its weight in education and research. Australia has a rich tradition of discussing and debating how to sustain

▶ a world-leading higher education system. As a modest contribution, we explore policy options relating to students, academics, institutions and the system.

To be useful and effective any higher education policy discussion must address learners. That is, in involving them in higher education, supporting effective learning engagements, and ensuring good learning and vocational outcomes. As a substantial and nimble system, Australia has done much in recent decades to progress work on these fronts. More reform is needed, however, as what works best perpetually evolves. Innovative policy initiatives are always required to be at the head of the curve. Australian institutions must find nimble ways of challenging students to achieve academic and individual excellence. Complacency on this matter will quickly leave Australia behind.

Rejigged funding algorithms over the last few years—essentially, the implementation of a voucher system where government will fund every student who wants to attend—have led more students than ever before to access higher education, though growth has concentrated in certain institutions and fields, and entry criteria have been relaxed. To ensure and improve standards and further diversify the student mix (including, importantly, doing more for disadvantaged groups) we need to explore radically new ways of admitting students—particularly school leavers—to higher education, including the use of a national aptitude test.

Australian institutions must become the smartest in the world in deploying sophisticated technologies to help people learn. The science of learner analytics—exploiting big data found lying around campuses—will provide IT systems, teachers, advisers and leaders with the intelligence they need to provide personalised and just-in-time challenges and supports for every learner. As online learning gets plusher, and rich campus-based experiences are enhanced. Student dropout can be mitigated, and most people can learn more. In essence, current online technologies allow us to easily target students who need learning support at a minimum of expense. As

“ *Australian institutions must become the smartest in the world in deploying sophisticated technologies to help people learn.* ”

part of its interest in new online modes of provision, the government should incentivise universities to apply these technologies to maximise the potential of all of our students.

By any reasonable account, Australian higher education does well supplying a complex dynamic economy with a high-quality professional workforce. But in terms of serious action about learning and graduates, Australia is shifting to the middle of the pack. Innovative educational ideas have been extended and in certain cases tested by institutions, but at the system level we have tip-toed around major policy change. This cannot continue. An important aspect of our competitive advantage will be proving that we do learning best. To underwrite any such pitch that ‘Learning is better in Australia’, we must do assessment better and cheaper, renovating educational methods built for bygone paper-based and batch-processing eras. The contemporary assessment practice should yield information that affirms the dimensions of students’ accomplishment. This would dispel recurring aspersions that graduates lack key skills on graduation, and show that Australia is at the head of the global pack in producing graduates with global skills.

Academics play a vital role in doing higher education better. In 2014, further tranches of Australia’s boomer-heavy academic workforce will retire. Yet the supply of new researchers still falls below replacement, and doctoral training still tends to be focused too narrowly on producing hefty dissertations rather than broader knowledge leaders. To

make matters worse, graduate students are largely despondent about their future opportunities as researchers, as they do not have a clear understanding of the pathways available to them for their future careers. A major review of research training is required. As well, we should get sharper at measuring and funding research. Understanding the international, and increasingly regional, market for academic talent should be a matter of national rather than just head-hunter priority. Finding new and better ways to lead and manage academics is essential, and is underexplored in any systematic scientific way. Similarly, national policy needs to encourage institutions to advance how they measure and improve the quality and productivity of teaching and research. There are ongoing challenges building capacity in the growing workforce that performs quasi-academic roles.

If higher education is to ‘do better with less’ then national policy must encourage innovative new institutional, business, education and research architectures. Such policy needs to tackle the inertia associated with thirty years of strategic levelling, and to encourage the kind of diversification that moderates risk and heightens return on national investment. Each institution should be ‘world-class’ in its own unique way. All institutions should not aspire to do all things for all people. Instead, they need the freedom to develop their strengths, and to provide for the skill demands that are specific to the region which they inhabit, and from which they derive most of their income. Restrictive regulatory frameworks should never impede each institution’s capacity to be the best higher education provider possible. So, the government should look seriously at funding, regulatory and quality policies in order to ensure that we can confront sameness and stimulate differentiation. The initial reaction to a Review of Higher Education Regulation seems to move positively in this direction, but time will tell if this translates into effective policy change. Ultimately, institutional leaders need more degrees of freedom rather than micro-interventionism.

More freedom means more responsibility, however, and there is a need to bring policies around transparency and disclosure into line with those for other sectors and industries. Institutions, rightly, should expect major review of funding arrangements that go well beyond tinkering, and in turn continue to implement technologies that confront cost and improve productivity.

Doing better for students, workers and institutions means changing system leadership. Most broadly, this means national policy which is at the same time creative, cogent and compelling. The national higher education policy agenda must look beyond short-run options to further advance Australia domestically but also internationally as a hub for the innovation and development of education and research. Included in this mix must be deliberation about whether system architecture is right for regulation, core

and competitive funding, assuring quality and fostering the deep autonomy that will stimulate diversification.

How can business and industry be more engaged, and what are the prospects for bolstering philanthropy? What, also, are the policy formulation dynamics that work best for this idiosyncratic sector? Conversely, what approaches have worked best for driving long-term change? What R&D is required to explore and distil options? How to balance these deliberations against funding priorities for areas like health and ageing? The federal government must lead national conversations around these issues to propel Australian higher education into an even better future. Australia now has an opportunity to implement meaningful and far reaching policy that secures our higher education future.

Professor Hamish Coates, Dr Lachlan Doughney both work at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne.

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Professor Linda Darling Hammond visits

STEPHEN DINHAM

National President of ACE, Professor Stephen Dinham chats with Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, while on a recent trip to Australia, about issues facing education and the role of professional associations such as ACE.

Stephen: Linda you have been to Australia many times before, however what brings you here this time?

Linda: Two things. I am conducting an international study of teacher policy in five countries of which Australia is one and Victoria is one of the states that we are looking at. I have many colleagues here at MGSE and I have been privileged to receive a Miegunyah Fellowship, which has given me the opportunity to visit and reconnect with all of my colleagues here.

Stephen: What do you see as some of the biggest issues facing education in the US at the present time?

Linda: The major challenges facing the US are severalfold. Firstly, we have a grossly unequal system of funding education, which is growing over the top of an increasingly disparate income base. For example, the top one per cent of wealthy people now control well over a quarter of the wealth of the country. The poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. The poor are going to schools that are under-resourced by large margins relative to other public schools.

Secondly, we have gone down the route (since 2002) of high stakes low-quality tests in a test-and-punish accountability

paradigm, which means that rather than focussing our schools on meaningful learning of 21st century skills, we have been focussing all of the instruction on lower order skills testing. For example, pick one answer out of five and reducing the emphasis on research, writing and investigating learning that students need.

Thirdly, as part of the ideological or political orientation over these years, we have been investing less and less in professional capacity. So some teachers are extraordinarily well prepared, but many are not getting the access to the preparation and professional development they need. We are trying to accomplish the very ambitious goals that we are setting for ourselves without building the necessary infrastructure to allow people to achieve those goals.

Stephen: In terms of Australia, have you had the chance to come to any conclusions about the developments here, and how do you think we may be tracking against developments in the US and elsewhere?

Linda: Australia is an interesting case because it had previously, in many of its states, an increasingly strong professional culture, by US standards. It has also had very thoughtful approaches to assessment in examination systems in, for example, Queensland and Victoria where in some places children have been doing more intellectually-challenging work.

However, in recent years it looks, from where I sit, that some of the problematic policies that have been pursued in the US are now appearing on the landscape in Australia.

There has been decreasing reform and equity that the Gonski reforms could really change, but they are being contested at the moment. There has been less investment in some states in building capacity in the quality of teachers than had been the case previously, and that is a worry. There is the possibility for some really useful work around the new national curriculum. However the NAPLAN tests, which preceded the national curriculum, look more like the low basic skills approach to testing that we have been seeing in the US.

So I see tensions in the system as it is trying to move in some productive directions such as the new national teaching standards and the national curriculum, which both end up with teaching and learning for 21st century skills. But there are some other noises in the environment around lower quality testing and less investing in teaching and distractions like merit pay, things we have tried in the US for a hundred years and have never worked. It will be interesting to see how Australia will manage these ideas and whether it can create, as it is intending to do, a thoughtful and forward looking system of teaching and learning.

Stephen: We have been looking in Australia at some simplistic measures to improve teacher quality that we know have tried and failed elsewhere. However, part of the situation in Australia has been that educators have largely been left out of these discussions which have been promoted by politicians, economists and business groups. Bearing this in mind, what role do you see professional associations like ACE playing in the future in terms of this context?

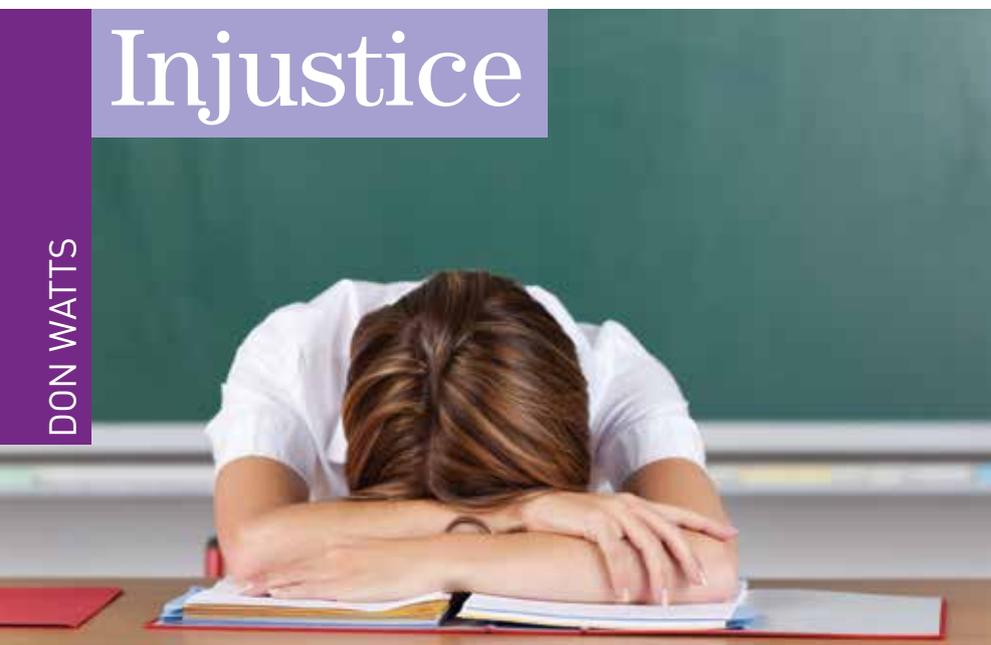
Linda: I think it is very important for professions to organise themselves and there is a quid pro quo that a profession makes with a society. The bargain is that if a profession defines, transmits and enforces standards of professional practice for all of its members, then the society expects the profession to make the technical decisions on how to improve knowledge and skills and practice. So if professional associations like ACE and others, can move the standards agenda forward in a clear unequivocal way, with respect to the capacity of the members of the association, it will be in a stronger position to lay claim to the expectation that they will also inform and shape the conditions of practice that are expected in the profession.

Professor Linda Darling-Hammond is the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education.

“ *Australia is an interesting case because it had previously, in many of its states, an increasingly strong professional culture, by US standards. It has also had very thoughtful approaches to assessment in examination systems in, for example, Queensland and Victoria where in some places children have been doing more intellectually-challenging work.* ”

Injustice

DON WATTS



I gained from and respected the late Professor A.J. (Jim) Parker who died far too young in 1980. We both entered UWA in 1951 and shared time as undergraduates, PhD students and then as postdoctoral researchers in London. We shared complementary research interests at UWA and later, for Jim, at Murdoch, until his death and my career changes into aspects of education management.

Despite the time we shared in those thirty years as experimental chemists, there was one aspect of our work in which we had different views. I was always, in his view, wasting time in seeking greater accuracy in the making of measurements. Jim maintained that, for the most part, there was nothing to gain from greater accuracy if less rigour produced an unequivocal argument to support or refute your hypothesis or, indeed, anyone else's.

I am reminded of our intuitive differences continuously today as I grapple with the measurements that educators make in judging students' readiness to gain from the next stage of their learning. These are serious matters. There is no credible defense of processes that encourage students to move upwards through the sequences from schooling to university and beyond if there is evidence enough

to suggest that there are low levels of mastery of the prerequisites necessary to confront the challenges at the next stage.

I am convinced that Jim would be saying that we have evidence enough to take action in the interests of those who are falling behind. To ignore evidence on readiness simply sentences a significant percentage of students to confront unreasonable challenges in subsequent years, while locked into structures with peers whose readiness is very different.

“ I am reminded of our intuitive differences continuously today as I grapple with the measurements that educators make in judging students' readiness to gain from the next stage of their learning. ”

He would correctly remind us that our inability to definitively measure readiness precisely is not a defense against failing to act in the interests of those whose progress demands it.

It is certain that claims some will not succeed at the next stage of education based on early evidence are disproven every day. Some are just not ready because of the opportunities life has presented. Others suffer as a result of a strange belief that age is a measure of readiness. On the other hand, to continue promotion upwards through the system on an annual basis without verifying a level of mastery of the foundation necessary for the next stage is irresponsible.

We all know that we do not have great confidence in the outcomes of testing when the scores are used at the individual level. This is particularly true now that the purpose of modern testing is simply to rank student performance compared with a selection of peers. Failure to master knowledge that forms part of the demands of subsequent learning is lost in processes of averaging and scaling.

When Jim and me were being judged on our readiness to continue through to university the emphasis was in asking the students to prove that they were ready for the next stage. The examination consisted of searching questions on aspects of the syllabus that, at the next stage, would be assumed to form part of a student's inventory. The mark achieved was a statement of readiness. The demand for specific outcomes in one subject was not the basis of university rejection because each of us were expected to present in at least five such subjects; most of us presented in seven. It is also worth mentioning that we were tested only three times a year, which removed any tendency for constant assessment to interfere with teaching and learning. Cumulative external assessments were undertaken only at the end of Years 10 and 12.

This philosophy still remained when I served as the chief examiner for chemistry in the matriculation processes in Western Australia. By the time I was to leave my chair in chemistry to become

director of the Western Australian Institute of Technology in 1980, it was clear that all this was due to change. The political forces that were to drive change over the next 30 years would take too long to tell here. However, it is relevant to record that I and my institution resisted what was happening. We had the view that it was in the best interests of all students that expected outcomes were defined and that students were given meaningful information on their readiness.

Jim would have said: 'Surely, it is better to provide information on readiness to proceed in planning future learning, than to claim that uncertainties in the marks introduce a potential to bring discrimination as an inevitable outcome.'

It is sufficient to say that a gathering of forces including the state education department, the Catholic Education Authority and, of perhaps greater importance, the teachers' unions became so critical of the universities' historical control of the determination of readiness that these responsibilities passed in all States to consortia of these groups with varying degrees of parental influence. The independent schools, I suspect because of their support for strongly competitive end-of-school examinations, sought not to play a strong role in all this.

Public governance has failed to grasp that consortia of self-interests seldom produce worthwhile outcomes.

As this was happening, these strong political forces emphasised what we knew about the lack of reliability in examinations where students were subjected to duplicate tests set and marked by different examiners. There were forces in all states pushing for judgements internal to the schools to carry greater weight. However, also emerging at this time were a breed of computer literate statistical mathematicians within education who convinced sufficient numbers within the control groups that it was less important to specify content of examinations as long as questions could be justified in that they were within the boundaries of less well defined syllabuses and less demanding aspirations. When all is said,

“ *If students fail tests on the mastery of sequentially related material it is evidence that recovery processes must be mandated.* ”

it was argued, university requirements should not be a consideration in choosing what should be taught and examined. None of these opinions are seen today to hold specific validity especially after a period in which the last Labor government insisted that equitable pathways were dependent on an objective that all should have access to a university.

A hidden agenda of teachers' unions throughout this evolution was to discredit measurements of specific educational outcomes that had the potential to provide evidence on teaching quality. Student outcomes in essential aspects of syllabus content must become respected data in judging the quality of the classroom. For the unions to continue their demands on class sizes when there is no valid research evidence suggesting that class size is a critical influence on learning outcomes simply discredits their integrity. For the unions to continue their stance that student learning outcomes should not be a prime measure in seeking to achieve better student outcomes is unbelievable. It is, of course, a genuine industrial matter to resolve on the use of data in making judgements on teacher performance.

If students fail tests on the mastery of sequentially related material it is evidence that recovery processes must be mandated. When deficiencies of this type are allowed to accumulate year-by-year without planned intervention, the damage can become irretrievable except in the hands of teachers with special skills and knowledge. This not only applies to the assumptions that can

be made about university entry but is important in the progression through the years of schooling. There is any amount of anecdotal evidence that many children accumulate irretrievable deficiencies, lose their will to keep trying and in various ways do great damage to many, in the same classroom, who are not being challenged or are wholeheartedly fighting to bridge the gap.

There are too many who give up trying because they recognise the festering deficiencies between their readiness and that of some in the same classroom. These circumstances are the foundations of inequalities that burden our belief in our schools. It might be that to intervene in separating peers after one year could bring unacceptable injustices but we can say that greater injustices are tolerated by a system that ignores the plight of many who find themselves, in say Year 6, already three years behind their peers in essential elements of their learning journey.

Whatever was wrong with the processes of selection that led to Jim and me qualifying for university, it was not that we were left with any doubt that we were tested on matters that determined our readiness to take on the next tasks. The marks we achieved were our own not contaminated with scaling and comparison with others. In addition, in first year university, we understood that we were expected to confront sequential learning experiences in mathematics, chemistry and physics and to study another subject of free choice not based on previous learning experiences.

Dr Don Watts was Professor of Chemistry at UWA, Director of the WA Australian Institute of Technology, Foundation Vice-Chancellor of Curtin University of Technology, Foundation President and Vice-Chancellor of Bond University and Emeritus Professor at the University of Notre Dame Australia.



Gonski to deliver Jean Blackburn's oration

Lyndsay Connors

One highlight of 2014 for educators will be the inaugural Jean Blackburn Oration on 21 May 2014 at the University of Melbourne. It will be delivered by David Gonski AC, chair of the 2012 Review of Schools Funding.

Jean Blackburn, economist and educationist and David Gonski, businessman and philanthropist, have each contributed their outstanding intellectual leadership to effecting major public policy reports on the broad issue of schools funding.

The late Jean Blackburn was a major contributor, as deputy-chair of the Interim Committee of the Australian Schools Commission, to the 1973 report, *Schools in Australia*. Chaired by Peter Karmel, the interim committee noted in its report:

The operation of democracy requires an acceptance of rational authority, an intelligent consideration of alternatives, a willingness to participate and an ability to transcend personal interests for the common good (5.4).

It could well have added 'sectional interests' to 'personal interests'.

Against these criteria, the Karmel report itself and the *Review of Funding for Schooling*, for which David Gonski was commissioned by the Australian government almost four decades later, were worthy contributions to Australian democracy.

Both reports are to be prized for the open and consultative process they followed and for the end result. Both add to the 'free flow of comprehensible information which makes democracy workable'¹.

Both argue the case for priority to be given to adequate and appropriate public investment in schooling in the interests of shared intellectual, social and economic advancement as well as in that of individuals.

But perhaps the strongest thread linking these two reports is the concern for equality and equity in and through education. In 1973 this was expressed as an obligation upon governments to ensure that 'the child's overall condition

of upbringing is as free of restriction due to the circumstances of his (or her) family as public action through the schools can make it'. In 2011, it was expressed as an obligation upon governments to ensure that 'differences in student outcomes should not be attributable to differences in wealth, income, power or possessions'.

The Commonwealth's decision in the mid 1970s to become a significant partner in schools funding brought many benefits. But it also brought costs, which were well recognised by Jean Blackburn in her later years. It led to schools funding becoming contaminated by the 'vertical fiscal imbalance' that infects Commonwealth-State relations in our federal system and creates the conditions for cost- and blame-shifting. It created a dysfunctional split between the responsibilities for the planning and operation of schools and their public financing. And it led over time to an irrational division of responsibilities between the Commonwealth and states and territories for public funding of government and non-government schools. Such conditions are highly conducive to political opportunism rather than to the responsible education funding policies that our children and young people deserve. One example is the use of politically expedient, short-term programs as a substitute for the long-term recurrent investment needed to sustain the quality of teaching in schools and to give them the capacity to plan their programs.

Acting in the public interest, governments have a continuing responsibility to understand the work schools do, the resources they need for that work and how to ensure that public investment in them is adequate, efficient and effective, as well as being fairly allocated according to the share of the workload they accept. Along with the problems outlined above, this created the imperative for the review headed by David Gonski.

Armed with that experience, he is ideally placed to deliver the inaugural oration in honour of Jean Blackburn.

¹ Barry Jones in *Sleepers, Wake!*, 1982

Young teachers have their say

NATASHA WELLINGS



On reviewing Don Watts' article 'The changing purposes of schooling' (*Professional Educator*, October 2013), one of the parts I find myself questioning is when he says: 'The solutions demand innovative approaches to creating diversity in our schooling systems that differentiate the needs of our children, none of whom are average'. Here, Don seems to be basing his article around the notion that there has been a decline in the academic standards needed for teachers, and of assessment, differentiation and innovation in today's classrooms. From my personal experience to date as a young teacher, I don't feel that is entirely the case.

Don reflects on his early schooling experience and explains that the general understanding was that when there were deficiencies in teachers' pedagogy, students were expected to apply themselves more and take responsibility for their own learning. However, from my experience few students fulfill this idea, especially when looking at it from within the K-6 setting. I feel that students need a rich, rigorous, engaging, relevant and effective teaching and learning program, which has the quality teaching elements at its core, and it is the teachers' responsibility to provide this program and ensure it meets students' needs. I believe that through providing stimulating, deep learning experiences, with constant and pertinent assessment in a variety of settings, teachers can achieve quality learning for all of their students... with no 'deficiencies' being ignored.

I also found myself reviewing Watts' observation that schools no longer regard learning as a sequential process, and that accumulated knowledge is no longer built on. Perhaps here he has the idea that young teachers have not been taught these disciplines, and that it is our 'preference' to program lessons based on stand-alone content? My training at university constantly promoted the importance of effective sequencing

and programming in order to achieve optimal outcomes in learning. I have been taught to persistently draw upon the prior knowledge of my students in order to achieve rich, meaningful learning outcomes. I have already witnessed the success of relevant, sequential planning with students being tracked using the learning continuums to monitor their progress and growth, and steer their learning.

Don also writes that schools and universities have lowered their standards, and that because of this the quality of teachers and therefore education is diminishing. However, I feel that I did learn in a way that was different to the 'norm'. Teaching programs were not differentiated to meet my needs and, as a result of this, I didn't realise my full potential until I went to university. However, with the excellent guidance and teaching I received at Notre Dame I was able to flourish. This was because my learning was meaningful. I have, from day one, been taught that differentiation is paramount to any and every lesson, so that students can reach their full potential. This consciousness during programming, knowing your students and how they learn, relevant summative and

“ Today's learning environment is very different from that of yesteryear, and students' needs are also very different as is the skill base and learning requirements for them.

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formative assessments, and a tool box of personal qualities that promote a positive and engaging classroom actually make the newly graduated teacher, and those already in schools who are receiving relevant ongoing professional learning, much more involved in their student's learning than those of yesteryear. Students' learning is designed to meet their specific needs.

I agree with Don's belief that schooling should be an accumulative process, where the knowledge that is gained in one year will work as bricks in the progressive wall of students' education. Teachers must ensure that their students have reached specific outcomes in order to transition to a higher grade. I also value his view that students need to take ownership of their learning, as it teaches them skills of independence and enthusiasm in learning. I also agree with his words stating that teachers must set clear boundaries in order to achieve success in learning.

I believe that the changes taking place in education today are all about what is best for student learning. Today's learning environment is very different from that of yesteryear, and students' needs are also very different as is the skill base and learning requirements for them. All students need to reach their full potential.

Nastasha Wellings recently completed a Bachelor of Education from University of Notre Dame and this year commenced a new role at Middle Harbour Public School, Mosman.

Professional Educator encourages all readers of the magazine to have 'your say' on this article and others in this first edition for the year. Please email acef@austcolled.com.au.



DYSLEXIA

The gifted disorder

Social media is great for staying in touch with family and friends and a fun way to spend some leisure time. I've been known to scan my inbox anxiously for news from a loved one, or idle away a bit of down time looking at cute animal pictures. I've also discovered, however, that this type of media can be surprisingly educational.

Among those I follow on social media are a number of celebrities chosen for their capacity to amuse. One makes much of being 'dyslexic'. Recently a post appeared asking for followers to participate in research on dyslexia. This was followed by a flurry of comments from people about their own dyslexia. I have personal experience of reading difficulties from watching family members struggle with early literacy.

All of these family members subsequently went on to read at very high levels, succeed at tertiary education and become very successful in their occupations. Some were formally diagnosed as 'dyslexic'. All also suffered from a lingering sense of being somehow deficient.

Because we live in a very materialist culture, we favour biological explanations for human behaviour. As with many other problems 'dyslexia' is frequently attributed to genes or differences in brain structure and/or function. Watching the struggles of family members revealed

that this attribution led to extra degrees of suffering attendant on the fear that they would 'pass on the bad genes' to their children.

Despite the faith in the existence of a discrete disorder of 'dyslexia', the best evidence points to a different explanation for the widespread reading failure in English-speaking countries, defined as an inability to or extreme difficulty with decoding text. While poor readers are found in all countries in non-English speaking countries poor readers are very slow readers, not readers who cannot decode written language. From this perspective 'dyslexia' appears less a biological disorder than a cultural affliction.

In addition, examining scores of reading tests doesn't reveal a group substantially different from the rest of readers. If dyslexia was a discrete condition you would expect this, rather like people with cholera show a set of symptoms that separate them from the healthy. Instead those labelled dyslexic are just poor readers.

In one way dyslexia does behave like an infectious disease, however, rather than a neurologically based disorder in that, like most infections, people get over it. If it's in the genes what happens to the bad genes when people master decoding text is a question that must be asked.

Rather than bad genes the widespread reading failure seen in English speaking countries is the result of the complex and messy English spelling system and a century of inadequate, not to say downright confusing, early literacy instruction. Yes, yes I know. Bring it on. Accuse me of advocating 'drill and kill' instruction.

Knowing that being diagnosed as having a biologically-based and supposedly genetic disorder can cause ongoing distress I weighed into the discussion on the social media site to assure people that they weren't broken, but the past victims of poor reading instruction. I could have also

noted that those who flagged their own dyslexia were reading and writing about it with great skill. In any case the response astonished me.

Other posters began attacking me, sometimes virulently. The highlight was probably the one who suggested I take up residence 'on a low-lying Pacific island with Tony Abbott and other climate change deniers'. Instead of reassuring people I had enraged them.

The owner of the original post re-joined the discussion to tell me indignantly that dyslexia is actually a different way of seeing the world and a particularly valuable way at that. That's what educated me.

Being dyslexic is now for many a way of being distinctive and thus special, rather like 'being on the spectrum' is a distinction many also lay claim to. After all, who wants to be a boring old

neurotypical? Pointing out the origins of reading difficulties in ineffective instruction was robbing people of their different in a special way identity.

It would seem that there is now another impediment to making sure that literacy instruction is effective. That would be the cherished self-concepts of those who see their difficulties - and their children's - as a sign of their lying outside the increasingly despised 'normal' category. I can almost hear the cry 'if they can't be gifted let them be special!'

I've learned something valuable, if only that it's a bad idea to come between people and their cherished marks of distinctive identity, even if these look to the outsider like a stigma.

Catherine Scott works at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

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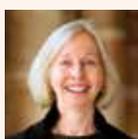
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