

## OPINION

### Equity in the Education Revolution

*Hon Julie Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister, 3 April 2008*

#### Acknowledgements

Thank you Professor Le Grew for the introduction and to the conference organisers for the invitation to speak today.

I would also like to acknowledge the Cadigal band of the Eora people, the traditional custodians of the land.

#### Introduction

"An education revolution to create one of the most highly educated and skilled nations on Earth."

This was the mandate that Kevin Rudd asked the Australian people for on November 24 last year – and they gave it.

It's a mandate for change that places education – in fact all aspects of our human capital – at the centre of the nation's economic and social investment priorities.

This makes it an exciting time to be involved in the formation of education policy.

The new Government will not ignore Australia's human capital needs. A new era of collaborative reform is being initiated. Traditional priorities and modes of service delivery won't do. New priorities are being set and new flexible ways of delivering services are being explored.

In the view of the Rudd Labor Government, education and training are the keys to Australia's future.

This is because in a global economy hungry for knowledge and skills, the nations that succeed will be those with the highest concentrations of education, skills, innovation and workforce participation. In other words, the future will belong to the nations with the best human capital and the most inclusive societies.

The Government has made a fast start towards meeting this challenge, implementing the education promises we made in the election campaign.

For instance, in the four months we have been in office, we have:

- o Established a new National Curriculum Board, chaired by Professor Barry McGaw;

- Established Skills Australia as a new advisory body to ensure skills training is directed at the needs of industry;
  
- Announced 20,000 new training places as the first down payment on 450,000 new places over four years, the majority of which will be at Certificate Level III and above; and
  
- Opened applications for our \$1 billion National Secondary Schools Computer Fund and our \$2.5 billion Trade Training Centres in Schools program.

We have also begun the process of strategic policy change aimed at making long-term, systemic improvement to our education system, from early childhood development to postgraduate research.

A Council of Australian Governments or COAG working group that I chair has agreed to a comprehensive set of outcome targets and reform directions the first time in this nation's history that there has been a comprehensive education vision agreed between the states and territories and the commonwealth.

On 13 March I announced a major review of higher education to be led by former University of South Australia Vice-Chancellor, Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley.

Today I want to drill down on one of the important issues facing COAG and the Bradley Review – educational equity. Of course while the review is in progress we will be delivering our important election promises to higher education including the phasing out of full fee paying undergraduate places for Australian students.

### **Why equity is important...**

It's no coincidence that, in addition to being Minister for Education, and Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, I am also Minister for Social Inclusion.

It's because each of these areas is linked to the question of how we become a more prosperous nation without jettisoning the values of fairness and equal opportunity that made us what we are.

They're about harnessing our human capital in the most effective way to create the sort of future we want.

Equity is important to our education and training systems in so many ways.

It is of course an important moral issue for our country.

A nation that thinks of itself as essentially egalitarian can't sit by idly while those from disadvantaged backgrounds are denied the life opportunities that come from higher education – things like higher incomes, career progression, intellectual fulfilment and self-knowledge.

Studies show that education is one of the strongest guarantees of individual prosperity, social mobility and economic security:

- We know, for instance, that having post-school VET qualifications reduces a person's likelihood of being unemployed by 40 percent, and having a university degree reduces it by 60 percent.
  
- And we know that on average, people with post school qualifications earn more and live longer, healthier lives than those who lack them.

Educational equity is also an important economic issue.

A number of trends are making this a major imperative.

Every year, industry restructuring and advances in technology require an increasingly higher skilled workforce. Analysis of occupations shows the fastest growth is now occurring at the high-skill end of the job market – for managers, professionals and associate professionals.

With demographic changes projected to more than halve the proportion of working to non-working Australians over the next half century, we simply can't afford to have large numbers of our potential workforce lacking in the knowledge and skills they need to contribute to our pressing economic needs.

We know that increasing the average level of education in our population leads to economic gains for the country as a whole:

- Research by the Productivity Commission has found that the right sort of early childhood, education, skills and workforce development policies could boost participation by 0.7 per cent and productivity by up to 1.2 per cent by 2030. This would translate to an increase in GDP of around 2.2 per cent, or around \$26 billion in today's dollars.
  
- The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations recently estimated that increasing the number of working age people with post-school qualifications by 1 per cent would contribute around \$8 billion dollars every year to GDP.

- And the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics' data shows that labour force participation for people with degrees and skills is higher for every age group compared with people with no post school qualifications.

The connections are simple: higher levels of post-compulsory education lead to rising levels of workforce participation, which in turn lead to rising productivity and rising prosperity.

So when it comes to education, greater equity means greater success for Australia.

### **Australia's equity performance is poor...**

But a frank assessment of our education system today would have to lead to the conclusion we have a major problem with equity.

While we have many high achievers, our 'tail' of lower performers is long.

We suffer from weak literacy performance in the bottom layer of school students and high drop out rates.

The end result of our historical patterns of education coupled with years of neglect is a relatively high rate of 25 to 64 year olds with only lower secondary school qualifications.

When it comes to university education, while total numbers of students have grown spectacularly since the early 1980s, the socio-economic mix of students has hardly changed for the last 40 to 50 years.

The participation rate of disadvantaged groups, notably students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and Australians from regional and remote areas, remains low.

In fact, the participation rate of students from lower socio-economic status background in higher education, fell from 15.1 per cent to 14.6 per cent between 2001 and 2006. By comparison, in 2006, about 25 per cent of the population was from low socio-economic status backgrounds.

This is true across all disadvantaged groups.

Between 2001 and 2006 the higher education participation rate of regional students declined from 19 per cent to under 18 per cent, and regional students were 7 per cent less likely to complete 12 years of school than city students. In remote areas the gap is 17 per cent.

Indigenous Australians make up 2.3 per cent of the population but only 1.2 per cent of higher education students.

I don't think we can really be surprised by these developments, given Commonwealth policies in recent years.

In my opinion, while they may not constitute the overriding reason why people from poorer families aren't entering university in greater numbers, the compounding effects of rising fees and living costs, combined with narrower access to financial support, must be taking their toll. Since 2002 the proportion of full time students receiving income support has fallen from 35 per cent to 27 per cent.

Many academics, seeing their students frequently skipping lectures to go to casual jobs, believe this is having a negative effect on students' ability to study and causing some to drop out.

Clearly, in equity terms, we have been heading in exactly the wrong direction.

It is now time to address the intergenerational cycle of educational disadvantage.

Students must not be excluded from higher education on the basis of their socio-economic background, gender, disability or geography because we need to utilise the stored-up human capital that resides in every Australian if we are to reach our economic and social goals.

### **Much can be done at the higher education level...**

We must not kid ourselves that low participation in post-compulsory education will be easy to turn around.

It will take a huge effort at every level of education and training.

There is much we can do at the higher education level itself.

One thing's for sure – not a lot has been tried in the last few years.

The new Government has recently announced a number of important higher education equity measures:

- To reduce barriers caused by cost, we are abolishing full fee university courses for domestic undergraduate students.
  
- We will be cutting HECS by approximately 50 per cent for new students studying maths and science – and paying 50 per cent of the HECS repayments of maths and science graduates for five years where they choose to work in a maths or science related occupation.
  
- We will be doubling the number of undergraduate Commonwealth Scholarships from 44,000 to 88,000 and the number of post graduate scholarships from 5,000 to nearly 10,000 across Australia by 2012.

- And there will be a number of new scholarship types under the Commonwealth Scholarships Program, known as the National Priority Scholarships which will target students enrolling in national priority areas and the National Accommodation Scholarships for students relocating interstate to study specialist courses not available near their home.

I am pleased to confirm the Government's decision to support the establishment of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at the University of South Australia.

As you know, the University of South Australia has a national reputation in terms of strong equity performance, and is well-positioned to inform the sector of best practice in student equity policy.

The key objective of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education is to inform and lead the higher education sector in demonstrating and researching best practice to attract, retain and progress students from the targeted equity groups. It will also act as a national repository of funding initiatives, programs and exemplars of student equity policy best practice.

It's going to be an important policy resource as we set about reducing educational disadvantage in the coming years.

**But the reasons for low tertiary attainment are deeper...**

Of course, we know that the reasons why students from disadvantaged backgrounds don't make it to higher education usually have their roots far earlier in life.

Compelling international evidence tells us that unless children receive a good grounding in their early years, their educational progress will be held back.

This means our approach to equity must be broad and deep.

Efforts must start in the early years.

That's why the Rudd Labor Government will ensure that by 2013 every Australian child has access to high quality early childhood education, delivered by a qualified teacher in the year before they commence formal schooling.

And it's why we've agreed to establish up to 260 child care and early learning centres across Australia, targeted at high needs and disadvantaged areas, underpinned by a new quality assurance framework.

I mentioned a number of school initiatives earlier, but the recent COAG also agreed to a new national partnership to boost school education, focussed on the particular educational needs of low socio-economic status schools.

The partnership will reform school funding arrangements, improve teacher quality and resourcing, and demand higher standards and expectations of all students.

It will aim to lift the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate to 90 per cent across Australia.

And it will try to at least halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy and Year 12 equivalent attainment rates.

Our universities know better than anyone that we need to inspire students from low socio-economic backgrounds about university life. Having planted the seed of inspiration we then to help students from poorer backgrounds make it to university. A number of innovative projects are underway which could potentially be models for nation-wide action.

I'm talking about great projects like the "ASPIRE" pilot program run by University of New South Wales and the University of Melbourne's Access Melbourne scholarship and assistance program.

### **Reaching out to the Indigenous population of Australia -**

There is a vast gap of disadvantage for Indigenous peoples. 'Closing the Gap' is a key element in successfully addressing Indigenous disadvantage, and a central plank of this Government's social inclusion agenda.

In his apology to Indigenous Australians, the Prime Minister outlined the Government's targets for bridging the divide in life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The Prime Minister spoke of the need for a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, to work together to close the gap. As spelt out in his address, the guiding principles of this partnership are respect, cooperation and mutual responsibility. We see the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council as a key partner in this important work.

Our Government wants fresh ideas and new approaches to enduring problems. We will be a Government that takes impartial expert opinion and evidence seriously before we make important policy decisions.

The Government is supporting a new initiative from the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council and Universities Australia, through providing \$125,000 in 2008-09 for a scoping study for an Indigenous Learned Academy and an Indigenous Centre for Research Excellence.

Two key agendas for the Learned Academy and Indigenous Centre for Research Excellence are building Indigenous research capacity within the higher education sector, and sustaining and promoting Indigenous knowledge systems.

Building strong Indigenous leadership in our Universities and supporting our Indigenous students and staff are key to encouraging more Indigenous young people to undertake tertiary study and seek opportunities at a postgraduate level.

Our aim must be to reach a situation where natural academic ability, not socio-economic background, is the sole criterion for entry to and success in higher education in Australia.

The current Review of Higher Education is a good place to start.

As you know, the Review's Chair, Professor Denise Bradley, has a strong interest not only in ensuring academic rigour but also equity and access.

The Higher Education Review Expert Panel has written to key stakeholder groups seeking their views.

Let me suggest a number of issues regarding equity that you may like to address in your submissions to the Review Panel:

- If participation is to increase, where should we target our efforts?
  
- Should we set targets for improved participation by students from low socio-economic status groups, Indigenous, regional and remote students?
  
- How do we improve the socio-economic mix of enrolments in all universities including the Group of Eight?
  
- Should we require the other higher education institutions to be more proactive in their equity efforts? If so, in what ways?
  
- What should be done about student income support?
  
- How can we address the underlying issue of low aspiration for university entrance in lower socio-economic households?

## **Conclusions**

Guaranteeing Australia's economic future is going to involve considerable investments in our human capital.

Its aim is to achieve excellence – but excellence for all, not just a fortunate few.

The new Government is determined to turn around the trends towards educational disadvantage.

This is something we care deeply about.

In fact, it's the very thing that motivated a lot of my colleagues, including the Prime Minister and myself to stand for office in the first place.

It's going to take action across a whole range of areas. Old ways haven't necessarily worked, so we want new ideas.

We will be a Government that takes impartial expert opinion and evidence seriously before we make important policy decisions.

That's why we want your input, ideas and energy as we set about making Australia's education system better and more equitable.

Thank you.