

Session IV: Education

Reshaping Australian education

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Australia faces a significant problem. It relates to how the concept of a “Knowledge Nation” has permeated our popular imagination, in a manner which has tended to distort our perspective on educational success.

The challenge goes beyond the way in which we teach students at our schools, TAFEs and universities. We have come to mistake what knowledge means or how it relates to contemporary society. Traditionally, the concept implies both theoretical and practical understanding of how to access and interpret information and mastery of skills. It can be gained through formal education, a structured apprenticeship or experience gained from life. That’s why people of my generation used to talk of wisdom being gained through the “school of hard knocks.” We extolled “common sense.”

The world is changing. Today, knowledge is often narrowly perceived in terms of an academic prowess that prepares those students who are most able scholastically with the capacity to forge professional or managerial careers. Whilst preparing government reports (*Looking to the Future*, 2020 and *In the Same Sentence*, 2021) I talked at length to groups of senior secondary students. I was disturbed by how many of them associated knowledge acquisition exclusively with the half of them who aspired to higher education.

This unconscious bias is subverting educational purpose. The ATAR is no more than a university ranking tool, designed for administrative convenience. Yet too often it has been portrayed as the dominant measure of school success, not just by teachers and their pupils, but even more so by parents. It privileges academic pathways. Indeed, the ATAR score is often seen as more indicative of educational prowess than the Higher School Certificate. Unlike ATAR, the HSC can include measures of student performance in a wide range of subjects that are vocationally oriented. Unfortunately, the ATAR score, more narrowly calculated, has come to define success in the mastery of knowledge at school.

Such simplistic perceptions of educational achievement harm the decision-making of young Australians. They undermine the foundations of a “fair go” society in which all contributions to the labour market are valued. They fail to recognise the diversity of skills and attributes that are necessary to lift Australia’s productivity and sustain economic growth.

We need to counter these narrow assumptions in four ways.

First, we need to convey to students from an early age that the most important educational motive is to allow them to live richer lives as adults — whether it’s attending “Hamlet” or stripping down a Harley

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Davidson. That is the intrinsic value of education. We must not lose sight of it.

Second, we need to recognise that, whilst education has an instrumentalist purpose, it is broader than generally understood. I am fully persuaded that we need to prepare people for an uncertain future in which the knowledge required in the paid workforce is likely to change rapidly. It's now more likely to be professional and administrative skills that are progressively eroded by cognitive technologies, digital communication, robotic processing and artificial intelligence — unlike 50 years ago, when it was predominantly trade and factory skills that were destroyed by automation. We need to emphasise in our teaching the virtue of being adaptable to change.

But there's an equally profound utilitarian goal of education. In a world in which the “end of history” now seems a distant memory of failed hopes — and in which the liberal values of individual and collective freedom are under increasing attack from authoritarianism, autocracy, populism and xenophobic nationalism — we need to instil in our young people the significance of civic participation and active citizenship. The future of democratic governance depends on it.

For both of these reasons, as well as for personal fulfillment, we need our educational system to inculcate the desire to keep on learning. In preparing young Australians for adulthood, we need to ensure that they are confident enough to continuously acquire new skills and change employment direction during their long working lives. That means that our pervasive rhetoric of “life-long learning” needs to be accompanied by the public provision of life-long career advice. The ever-present danger is that we will have a growing body of workers whose

relationship to the labour market becomes casualised and precarious.

Third, we need to forsake an increasingly outmoded demarcation between higher and vocational education. It is an artificial distinction presented to students at secondary school. The fact is that an increasing number of students now enter higher-education institutions with vocational intent. Moreover, an increasing number of pathways now allow them to move relatively easily between modes of education when they leave school. Access to a growing array of micro-credentials is weakening the rigidities of the Australian Qualifications Framework. That's a good thing.

We should stop suggesting to school students that they have to choose between demarcated “dual” sectors — between higher or vocational education, between academic study or skills development, between university or TAFE. Rather, we need to re-imagine a single-sector tertiary education which fully integrates theoretical and practical perspectives.

That is the thinking behind the decision to pilot new Institutes of Advanced Technology in NSW. Two have already been established: one in digital technology at Meadowbank, one in modern construction at Penrith. The goal is to provide students with the opportunities to progressively stack credentials in the same area of study, by undertaking industry-focused tertiary education that incorporates workplace learning ... but, of course, only for those students who are attracted to such a course of study.

Finally, we need to help young people develop the underlying life skills that they require for their future employment, civil engagement, and purposeful lives. Without wishing to be overly prescriptive, these

include the ability to think through and solve problems, to plan ahead, to communicate clearly (and with civility), to work collaboratively, to be creative and to make decisions ethically.

Young people need to be taught to recognise their skills and behaviours. Equally important, they need to be imbued with a sense of agency and control, so that they can fully appreciate the extent to which they are developing these attributes — not just those they learn in the school classroom, sports field, workshop, or auditorium, but also those they acquire volunteering for the Red Cross, advocating for the WWF or working shifts at Hungry Jacks.

Conclusion

If we can instil that broader sense of learning, then we will be able to stop seeing educational inequities simply through the lens of social disadvantage. By taking a strengths-based approach to learning, we can help young people to recognise the skills that they have acquired in overcoming challenges. The Aboriginal boy in remote Australia who takes time out to learn men's business; the young migrant girl who has to interpret for her non-English-speaking mum at the doctor's surgery; the child of a low-income family, forced to learn online, working at the kitchen table during pandemic — these experiences of anxiety or adversity, with the help of teachers and mentors, can be recognised as an opportunity to display the same underlying schools-based skills that they acquire in studying English or Maths.

This is the underlying purpose of the Learning Profiles being trialled in NSW.

They provide an opportunity to convey the powerful message that paths to knowledge are varied; that, if one has *learned to learn*, there will be plenty of opportunities to enhance education and skills development throughout life; and that vocational choice should reflect personal interest and ability, not just misplaced assumptions of social status.

We require an education system that recognises that knowledge can be acquired in many ways, for many purposes, for many years. We need to design our structures so that students recognise that skills of the head need to be complemented by skills of the heart and of the hand. Young Australians should be assured that the learning paths that they take are ones that should reflect their personal choices throughout their lives and not be limited by unwarranted, school-driven structures that privilege academic forms of education.

Australian education needs to be reshaped.

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