Australia brings the Ashes home

Don’t panic: Australia still holds the Ashes, after beating England in the 2006-07 series, nobody swiped cricket’s famous urn from the Marylebone Cricket Club and the next Ashes series is still to be held in England in 2009. This year, however, Australia defeated the United Kingdom to win the inaugural Mathematics Ashes before the International Mathematics Olympiads (IMO) held in Spain. The two teams trained together in Lisbon before the Olympiad. Their final training exam became the official one for the new Ashes competition, to be conducted annually. The UK scripts were burned and permanently sealed in an urn to be held by the winning team. The Australian win was relatively comfortable, with a final score of 72 points as against 55 scored by the UK.

The six students in the Australian team at the IMO placed 19th of the 97 competing teams, three positions higher than in 2007. Australia achieved the highest score of any Western country other than the United States. China had the highest score.

Paul Cheung from Sydney Technical High School, Andrew Elvey Price from Brunswick Secondary College, Melbourne, Giles Gardam from Hurststone Agricultural High School, Sydney, Irene Lo from James Ruse Agricultural High School, Sydney, and Max Menzies from Sydney Grammar School were silver medallists while Sampson Wong from James Ruse Agricultural High School took bronze.

The team was selected from more than 20,000 students who participated in the Mathematics Challenge for Young Australians, the next level up from the annual Australian Mathematics Competition in which several hundred thousand students from almost every school in Australia participate.

A Hundred Years’ War?

Melbourne’s Age newspaper began yet another round in Australia’s interminable ‘reading wars’ last month, pitching RMIT University senior lecturer in psychology, Dr Kerry Hempenstall, against Australian Literacy Educators’ Association president, Dr Jan Turbill.

‘The most reliable approach begins with teaching students about how the written word is simply a visual code for the spoken word,’ Hempenstall wrote.

‘Learning to read begins with meaningful texts,’ Turbill countered. ‘Children need to understand why they need to learn to read as well as learning the skills of reading. There are many approaches in the teaching of reading and the artful teacher knows when to use which approach and in what order to do so.’

It all looked like the heat of battle was missing, which may be why the Age’s Caroline Milburn went to the chair of the 2005 national inquiry into the teaching of reading and recently retired Research Director at the Australian Council for Educational Research, Dr Ken Rowe, described by Milburn as ‘blunt,’ ‘irascible’ and ‘candid.’

‘Nothing has actually happened since the inquiry because higher education providers of education and those who provide ongoing professional development of teachers, with a few exceptions, are still puddling around in postmodernist claptrap about how children learn to read,’ Dr Rowe said. ‘Both the local and international evidence base is unequivocal about the role of phonics in teaching reading. We know what actually works.’

The president of the Australian Council of Deans of Education, Professor Sue Willis, said Dr Rowe’s report from the inquiry, Teaching Reading, recommended that phonics should be used alongside other approaches to teaching reading.

We may, according to Milburn, be in the final stages of the ‘reading wars’ – or not.

Super principal

The appointment of Melbourne’s Mount Waverley Secondary College principal, Glenn Proctor, as Victoria’s first ‘super principal’ to head Hume Central Secondary College is part of the Victorian government’s ambitious Broadmeadows Schools Regeneration project in the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s northern metropolitan region.

Under a new ‘executive contract’ scheme, Proctor’s salary will rise from an estimated $130,000 a year to an estimated $150,000 – still substantially below many non-government counterparts. The aim of the scheme is to recruit successful principals to turn around the performance of the Victoria’s most challenging state schools.

The state’s multi-million dollar Broadmeadows project is merging 17 schools to create seven primary schools and Hume Central Secondary College, which has two campuses, one for Years 7 to 9 and one for Years 10 to 12.

Victorian Premier John Brumby, who is the member for Broadmeadows, would be well aware that something near half of all secondary schools in the northern metropolitan region are in the bottom 20 per cent of the state, measured in terms of student scores in the Victorian Certificate of Education, while close to 40 per cent of primary schools score in the bottom 20 per cent, measured in terms of standard reading benchmarks.

‘To some extent, it will be about redressing some of the comparative disadvantage that these areas may have suffered in the past,’ Proctor told the Age’s Farrah Tomazin.

‘There will be a whole range of challenges..., but it’s also an opportunity to do something in a very positive way.’
ATOM contenders

Finalists in the Australian Teachers of Media ATOM Awards were announced last month, with winners announced next month. Contenders for Best Middle School Multimedia Production: Beast, Sarah Lang; Brucinator, Gold Creek School, ACT; The Water Boy, Stephanie Leung, and Revenge of the Worm, Stephanie Leung, Mount St Joseph’s Girls’ College, Melbourne.

Contenders for Best Middle School Video Production: Dropped In, Alyce Burnett, Immanuel Lutheran College, Queensland; The Feud, Balga State High School, Perth; and Somewhere I Belong, James Tan, Overnewton Anglican Community College, Melbourne.

Contenders for Best Primary Film Video Production: Remote, Nera Skripic-Vuckovic, Mayfield State School, Queensland; Nerdtroon Vs Halfdollia, Samuel Burrows, National Hen News, Miranda Rogers, and Up, Up and Away, Harvey Williams, all from Camdenville Public School, Sydney.

Contenders for Best Primary Multi-media Production: A Message From the Past, Shyamila Deniyage, Lyndale Primary School, Melbourne; The Final, Lyndale’s Year 6 students; and My Life As A Rain Drop, Isabella Horrigan, Methodist Ladies College, Melbourne.

Contenders for Best Secondary Animation: Rut, Sarah McConnell, Firbank Grammar School, Melbourne; Culture Shock, Mei-Lynn Wilkinson, Narrabundah College, ACT; The Lands of Good and Bad, Elise Cassar, Brentwood Secondary College, Melbourne; and Creative Creatures, Guy Verge Wallace.

Contenders for Best Secondary Documentary: I’m A Little Teapot, Elyse McConnel, Melbourne Girls’ College; Trampoline, James Purcell, Scotch College, Melbourne; UnAustralian, Ben Sale, Sandringham College, Melbourne; and Emancipation, Kristen Zekic, Overnewton.

Contenders for Best Secondary Fiction: Creative Creatures, Guy Verge Wallace; The Lane Game, Isabella Giovinazzo, Melbourne Girls’ College; and Deception, Tom Franke, Scotch College.

All change

Teaching Australia chief executive Fran Hinton has resigned, but will stay until the end of this year. Gregor Ramsey, meanwhile, is not seeking reappointment as Chair of the board at the end of this year. The terms for most members of the Teaching Australia board expire at the end of this year and few are expected to seek reappointment.

Ramsey says Hinton’s work on the Teaching Australia Network, charter for the profession and national professional standards means she will leave the organisation in good shape.

Funding for Teaching Australia was cut in the May Budget by $2.6 million to $3.9 million. The Commonwealth is also reviewing the role, governance and consultative arrangements of Teaching Australia.

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, meanwhile, has decided to establish a National Teacher Education Accreditation System to coordinate the work of state and territory teacher accreditation and registration bodies.

Coincidentally, the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council (APAPDC) has changed its name to Principals Australia, but chief executive Susan Boucher has stressed that an appropriate strap line will be added to the new Principals Australia name, ‘to ensure a clear understanding that the work of the... (newly named) Principals Australia is to do with (the) professional development and learning of school principals and those aspiring to the principalship.’