

Restoring our edge



in education



Professor Geoff Masters

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*Much of what is required to improve the quality of Australian school education is widely understood and agreed, as **Professor Geoff Masters** explains.*

The levels of educational attainment of Australian students will play a key role in the outcome of future individual, social and economic prosperity. Individuals benefit from high levels of education and training, which increase individuals' ability to secure meaningful work, earn more, and break cycles of disadvantage. Society as a whole benefits from high levels of education and training, which are related to better health, family functioning and children's wellbeing, less violent crime, and even a cleaner environment. The economic prosperity of the nation is also secured through high levels of education and training, which are directly linked to high levels of workforce participation and national productivity. While the educational standards of Australian students are excellent in many areas, policies that support further improvement of education and training levels will have significant positive effects for individuals, standards of living and social cohesion.

Australia's education: Achievements and concerns

There have been steady increases in the educational achievement levels of young Australians over recent years, but several issues of concern remain: the considerable number of young people who become disengaged from schooling, do not achieve high educational standards and have restricted participation in employment in work or further study; and the effect this

will have on the future workforce, namely a shortage of the well-educated and highly-skilled young people Australia needs.

Despite overall increases in education levels and high levels of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy among young Australians on average, there are wide gaps between the highest and lowest levels of achievement, and a significant proportion of young people leave school with only minimal standards of education. Many seem to become disenchanted with, and disengaged from, schooling during their secondary years, or leave early, giving Australia one of the lowest secondary school completion rates among developed countries.

Children begin school with markedly different levels of individual development and school readiness, but the education system does not seem to provide redress to the wide variations in students' levels of achievement. In some areas of the school curriculum, variability in students' levels of attainment appears to increase across the years of school.

Low levels of literacy and numeracy are associated with early school leaving and are correlated with a range of other variables, including low overall academic achievement, disengagement, truancy and anti-social behaviour. Students who do not achieve at a high level or do not complete secondary school are more likely to experience unemployment, are less likely



to engage in further education or training after leaving school, and tend to earn less when they do gain employment.

Too few young people are developing the knowledge and skills required for effective workforce participation. Australia faces a particular skills shortage at the trade and associate professional levels. The future Australian workforce will require both higher level skills and a broader range of skills which will need to be updated more frequently than in the past.

Australia's future economic competitiveness clearly will depend on maintaining and enhancing current levels of education and training, and in particular, on increasing the numbers of young people completing secondary school or the equivalent.

Strategies to improve education and training outcomes

There is no simple solution to address the dual concerns of the significant proportion of students disengaging from schooling and achieving only minimal standards, and the considerable skills shortage in a range of industries and skill levels. There are several strategies, however, that Australia can implement at the level of school education that are likely to deliver improvements in education and training outcomes.

The strategies are early intervention, customisation, professionalism of teaching, increased investment, and improved governance.

Early intervention

The early intervention strategy requires the education system to provide educationally-oriented early learning, and to identify students' potential learning problems before they become entrenched and before students become disenchanted and disengaged.

The importance of the early years to children's lives is now beyond question but policy and practice in early education and care in Australia still lack focus and integration, and to date, Australia has not had a coordinated, national, whole-of-government approach to early childhood education and care.

The complexity of existing planning, regulations and funding of current early childhood arrangements is contributing to subsequent differences in educational outcomes. In particular, the developing trend for welfare-oriented childcare for low income families, as contrasted with educationally-oriented preschools and kindergartens for middle income and more affluent families, will further polarise academic outcomes already differentiated along socioeconomic and geographic lines.

This strategy requires a greater focus on development in early childhood; a coordinated, national, whole-of-government approach to early childhood education and care; and routine assessments to identify and address learning difficulties in early childhood.

Customisation

The customisation strategy requires the education system to make education and training more responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of individual learners.

In schools, it has been common to group students by age for the delivery of grade-based curricula, but in a mixed-ability classroom, the same learning activities can be frustratingly difficult for some students and boringly easy for others. One-size-fits-all approaches are in general much less effective than approaches which are responsive to the progress and needs of individual learners.

Group-based solutions also have been sought to problems of student underperformance. Although differences in school achievement can be seen at the level of groups, such as boys, Indigenous students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, group-based interventions have in general been disappointing. Interventions targeted on underperforming individuals, regardless of group, are likely to be more effective. Regular monitoring is required to establish current levels of attainment and to diagnose obstacles to further progress.

In vocational education and training, young people traditionally have prepared for a relatively narrow range of occupations through standard courses and apprenticeships. In most cases, the assumption has been that people will remain in those jobs for extended periods, if not for life. In reality, however, today's young people will be employed in a wide variety of occupations, are likely to change jobs frequently and to be engaged in ongoing employment-related learning in relation to those jobs.

Future school and vocational education curricula should begin with an analysis of the kinds of learning likely to be required for the future, make clear what students are expected to learn, promote higher order skills and deep understandings of subject matter, and provide flexibility to enable teachers to respond to individual needs and local contexts. Flexible modes of delivery, including online learning, will offer further opportunities to customise education and training.

Professionalisation of teaching

Over recent decades, too few highly able young people have been pursuing teaching as a career. The challenge is both to attract more highly able young people into teaching

and to keep them in classrooms for longer periods of time.

Particular challenges exist in some curriculum areas such as mathematics and science. There are shortages of well-qualified mathematics and science teachers, especially in some schools and parts of the country, and large numbers of teachers are teaching in areas for which they are not well prepared.

Current pay structures see most teachers hit a pay ceiling about a decade after entering the profession. The best teachers tend to be promoted into leadership roles within schools, reducing the amount of time spent in classrooms. Rather than encouraging their development as excellent classroom teachers, current pay structures tend to encourage good teachers to stop teaching.

Part of the solution to this problem is likely to be the introduction of better ways of rewarding high-quality classroom teaching. Schools need explicit standards for highly accomplished practice, credible methods of assessing whether teachers meet these standards, and accompanying financial recognition to retain excellent teachers in classrooms.

Further, teachers require the forms of support normally available to professionals, such as access to paraprofessional assistance, current research and knowledge, and high-quality materials and resources.

At the same time, school leaders must be given greater say in staffing decisions, including appointments, processes for removing underperforming staff, and mechanisms for rewarding high performers.

Increased investment

Australia's public investment in education is below the OECD mean and Australia relies more heavily than most other countries on

private educational expenditure. Australia has a very low level of investment in early childhood education; physical facilities in many government schools are inadequate; vocational education funding fell by 11 per cent in the decade to 2004; and universities rely on private sources for more than half of their funding.

Increased public investment in education at all levels — early childhood, school education, vocational education and training and higher education — is required.

In the school education sector, partnerships between schools (both government and non-government) and between schools and local businesses and community organisations may also provide alternative sources of funding and greater sharing and more efficient use of human resources and physical facilities. Schooling outcomes also are likely to be improved by providing opportunities for learning to occur in a wider range of contexts than traditional classroom settings, and in more flexible timeframes than the traditional classroom day.

Improved governance

Australia is one of just a few countries with a federated system of states and territories with constitutional responsibility for school education. The consequences of Australia's inherited arrangements include inconsistencies in matters such as school starting ages, senior certificates and school curricula; the duplication of effort across state and territory agencies; a lack of comparability of achievement levels across Australia; and financial challenges for smaller jurisdictions in developing quality curricula and examination systems. A challenge over coming years will be to develop greater consistency around key school education issues, accompanied by increased investment in all Australian schools.

Educational policies must clarify the roles and responsibilities of different tiers of government and improve mechanisms for ensuring that education and training are meeting the needs of individuals and Australian society. There is an urgent need to reduce the current levels of duplication and to remove the unnecessary differences in educational provision across states and territories. At the same time, schools should be afforded greater local autonomy, flexibility and responsiveness to student, community and industry needs.

Meeting the challenge

Much of what is now required to improve the quality of Australian school education is widely understood and agreed. The challenge is not so much in identifying what needs to be done, as in finding ways to overcome obstacles that often have their origins in longstanding structural arrangements, traditional practices and vested interests. Significant improvements in school education will require bold new approaches, which, in some cases, will change how we think about and provide schooling for young people.

This is an edited version of a paper published by the Business Council of Australia, entitled *Restoring our edge in education: Making Australia's education system its next competitive advantage*. The full report is available at www.bca.com.au ■