

InToWin Australia - “A Platform for Participation in Improved Political Performance”

Chapter 3 – A building needs more than good foundations

3.3 Education

Education must be one of the most important functions to get right in a society. It is a key to so many of the economic and cultural outcomes we value and aspire to – in fact, I would say it is THE keystone. With that belief, it would be counter productive to view annual education outlays as purely a short-term expense item. It is reasonable to call it an investment in our future - but we still have to find a way to pay for it in the present.

In 2017/18, across Federal and State budgets, governments allocated over \$53 billion to recurrent spending on Education. Even that amount is not enough to provide high quality, free education. It exceeds the capacity of taxpayers to pay, and is a key contributor to budget deficits.

To alleviate the costs at the tertiary level, we have introduced a way for students to pay for their own education – borrowing against their future incomes. HECS, HELP, VET Fee Help and other government run student loan schemes have become the norm in the pursuit of higher education. This may be a smart way to give students “skin in the game”, as they have to take on responsibility for a big part of their own education funding. But the way it is sold – the ease with which students can take on massive debts that may never be repaid – suggests we have got something wrong. HELP debts currently stand at over \$48 billion.

So, forgetting the costs for a moment, what is the quality of education we are providing? What are we getting for our money? What are our students getting for their money? Well, that is hard to assess, and I could find stats to support whatever side of the argument I wanted to be on. 25% of students have not managed to complete their 3 year degrees even within 9 years of commencement. Relative to other first world countries, our academic results have been slipping. In absolute terms - relative to our own history - we are educating more students and have improved outcomes in a range of areas – whilst falling behind in others. As I said, pick a number! But I would say the jury is definitely still out.

Let me give you one person’s view on this state of affairs, and I quote –

“What are schools for? To train people for examinations? To enable people to comply with the law? Or to produce developed men and women?”

Are the universities mere technical schools, or have they, as one of their functions, the preservation of pure learning, bringing in its train not merely

riches for the imagination but a comparative sense for the mind, and leading to what we need so badly – the recognition of values which are other than pecuniary?

One of the great blots on our modern living is the cult of false values, a repeated application of the test of money, of notoriety, of applause. A world in which a comedian or beautiful half-wit on the screen can be paid fabulous sums, whilst scientific researchers and discoverers can suffer neglect and starvation, is a world which needs to have its sense of values violently set right.”

Now, I don't want to appear to be disparaging of our comedians and acting fraternity – Australia has produced many who stand alongside the best in their fields of work. But it is hard to imagine a better speech, a better statement, a better insight into the need for “holistic” education and a call to re-examine the alignment of financial rewards relative to our core values. It is somewhat confronting to realise that this quote is from a speech given by Sir Robert Menzies on 22nd May 1942. Yes, nineteen forty-two! That's over 75 years ago – more than long enough to make some improvements. I'm not sure we have made enough.

I am sure that in the competitive world in which we live, we need to keep doing better. Standing still in the education of our children, and ourselves, is definitely a recipe for going backwards.