

A new federalism in Australian education: A proposal for a national reform agenda

Review by John Dawkins AO, Chair Australian Qualifications Framework Council

Julia Gillard stated in her Fraser Lecture in May 2008 that: 'It is my intention as Commonwealth Minister for Education to do what our predecessors refused to do: to build a new consensus around the idea that when it comes to schooling, that we should strive for both equity and fostering individual aspiration. A new consensus that in education excellence and equity are partners not combatants.' She has followed this statement with strategies that have been proposed under the Government's Education Revolution programs, working through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), to develop a collaborative framework for national improvement. COAG has already agreed a set of outcomes and reform directions.

In schooling they focus on six key areas:

1. Improving teacher quality and school leadership
2. Setting high standards and expectations;
3. Boosting parental engagement
4. Greater accountability and better directed resources
5. Creating modern world-class learning environments, including in information and communication technologies; and
6. Raising attainment levels in low socio-economic status communities.¹

Jack Keating argues that these initiatives are not enough on their own and that deeper reforms are required 'to loosen the rigidities that are linked to the federalist characteristics of Australian schooling'.²

Keating does not deny that the Government's focus will assist increased quality in schooling outcomes. However in approaching reform in schooling from a federalist point of view, Keating suggests four key areas of 'mediations' and accompanying initiatives and projects to address the structural 'rigidities' that the current federalist model imposes: early childhood and transition from schooling; community expectations; the influence of social geography; and, institutional factors within the education and training system.

As Chair of the Australian Qualifications Framework Council, charged by the Deputy Prime Minister to improve pathways between the education sectors, I note that one of the projects that Keating proposes is 'to build the programs and pathways and to provide the incentives for providers to cooperate in their delivery'.³ While we are focusing initially on the vocational education and training/higher education nexus, it will be critical for us to also consider the connection with schooling. As a result, I cannot disagree with Keating's strategy regarding upper secondary schooling to ensure there is 'better engagement between the

¹ Gillard, Julia 2008 *A New Progressive Reform Agenda for Australian Schools*. The 2008 Fraser Lecture, Canberra, 28 May 2008

http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_081010_115404.aspx

² Keating, Jack 2009 *A new federalism in Australian education: A proposal for a national reform agenda* (final draft 9/4/09) p4

³ Keating, Jack 2009 p57

school, university and vocational education and training sectors. More structured linkages including credit-based and direct pathway programs should be developed.⁴

The Australian Qualifications Framework itself is one of the few tri-sector arrangements operating across Australia's post compulsory education system, providing a quality assurance mechanism to ensure that Australia's qualification system is cohesive, well understood, nationally and internationally recognised and nationally supported. Public and private schools, vocational education and training and higher education providers and universities deliver AQF qualifications across Australia and nationally. The Council is currently undertaking national consultations to ensure that the AQF remains credible and supports the national goals of building the knowledge and skills of the nation.

Keating states that 'the essence of (his) proposal is the whole picture' and presents a case for government to provide a vision of schooling that can be delivered and sustained. Keating argues that this vision for schooling is being inhibited by the structural 'overlay of federalism upon schooling in Australia'.⁵

There can be no argument that Australia requires a schooling system that can deliver quality and equity and that the current ambitious policy directions are not weakened or limited in Australia. A strong underpinning schooling system will be required to ensure that targets such as 90 percent of young people to have attained the Senior Secondary Certificate by 2015 and 40 percent of all 25-34 year olds to hold a qualification at Bachelor level or above by 2025 are met. Keating's seminal work provides a direction.

⁴ Keating, Jack 2009 p50

⁵ Keating, Jack 2009 p61-62