



# A clever country means extending learning opportunities

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This is the original text submitted to the *Australian*, published in the Opinion column in an edited form on October 18 2000

Will the clever country be for all, or for those who are already educationally privileged? Post-Olympic discussions about the clever country have focussed on the importance of resuscitating science, research and university funding, and equipping Australians to keep pace with technological innovation.

Labor hopes that education, and in particular its plans for a 'knowledge nation', will be a key factor in the next election, and it appears that the Government may be preparing to match Labor's pledge. Others are pointing to the need for Australia to match its sporting commitment by funding scientific research, higher education, and technology innovation.

But if we are serious about building a learning society then we must aim for more.

The relatively easy option is to fund educational elites at the expense of widening and increasing general participation levels. In the words of the Canadian writer John Ralston Saul, 'Highly sophisticated elites are the easiest and least original thing a society can produce. And the most difficult and the most valuable is a well educated populace.'

We have in Australia an existing and serious learning divide that weakens the foundations for a clever country. A few examples highlight this divide.

- Large scale national research last year showed that 21% of adult Australians will not participate in any structured learning once they leave (or escape?) school.
- Approximately 34% of people, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997 survey of adult literacy levels, do not have the minimum skills that would enable them to cope with the increasingly complex demands of civic life and employment. The ABS found that 17% of Australians are on the lowest of five levels having very poor literacy skills, and a further 27% at the second level can only deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out and deals with a single source of information.

More recently the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey, *Literacy in the Information Age*, shows that the proportion of Australians at the lowest literacy level is about double that of the Scandinavian countries. Inequalities in literacy levels correlate with economic inequalities.

- Three out of every ten school students do not complete their full schooling. And poor school experience inhibits future learning. Since the mid 1990s the rise in school retention rates has been reversed. The costs for those kids who leave early, for their present and future families and for the community are high in both economic and social terms. Those who do not complete are disproportionately from groups already disadvantaged in society and they will disproportionately experience unemployment, be unemployed for longer periods

and have substantially lower lifetime earnings. Their disadvantage is compounded and passed on.

Why press for widening participation in adult education and learning? Firstly, because education for all is a democratic right. Secondly, because the general well being of the society needs an educated, informed population to respond to social, economic and technological change.

To be a clever country we must do more than acquire new employment skills. We must also learn to facilitate informed discussion on key issues that often seem intractable. We can think of gene technology, reconciliation, salinity, safer communities, national identity, drug use, gambling, an ageing society, as areas where informed discussion would strengthen our civil society and help resolve some of these national discussions.

A learning society is mutually beneficial. Accomplished adult learners are more likely to support their children's learning; to be aware of and attend to their own health and well being; to be optimistic and purposeful in facing the future; to readily acquire new knowledge and skills when required; to be interested and involved in local affairs; and to be sceptical of dogmatic and simplistic solutions to difficult social issues.

While some state governments are showing leadership through innovative programs (the learning towns program in Victoria for instance) at a national level Australia is being left behind.

Britain, Singapore, Ireland, the OECD, the Group of 8 industrial nations have all committed themselves to working towards realising the learning age. In the UK there is a Minister for Lifelong Learning.

In Australia there are separate national policies on higher, school, vocational and community education. But there is nothing that integrates these areas. They are separate and national policy remains fragmented and incomplete. There is neither a national framework nor a national policy statement outlining the Government's general commitment to lifelong learning.

Adult Learning Australia has been pressing the federal government to take the lead in coordinating a national response for a learning society. Two steps should be taken. Firstly the government should convene a national lifelong learning summit that would bring together relevant industry, education, government agencies and community organisations. Secondly, the goal of this summit should be to generate a national policy framework.

The challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is how to extend learning opportunities, to recognise and support new forms of learning. The challenge for the Government and Opposition is how to respond to these challenges now. At the moment our horizons are too limited.