



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
PARTICIPATION AND EQUITY PROGRAM
CANBERRA - 3 SEPTEMBER 1984

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a privilege for me to participate in this first National Conference on the Participation and Equity Program. This Program is one of the cornerstones of the Labor Government's education policy : through it we hope to provide a great stimulus to the development of education in this country.

When the Government came to office eighteen months ago, we were faced with a number of serious economic and other problems. None of these was worse either in human or economic terms than the disastrous unemployment situation, especially as it affected young people.

The prospects for young Australians then were anything but rosy. In March 1983, actual unemployment among young Australians aged 20 to 24 years seeking full-time or part-time work was 15.3 per cent; among teenagers it was 24.3 per cent. Apprenticeship intakes had declined by about one-third to only 34,000 in 1982/83.

The disillusionment this engendered among our young people was reflected in a sharp falling away of interest in higher education and training opportunities.

The Government then placed the highest priority on tackling these problems. We believed then, as we do now, that Australia cannot afford to squander its human and economic resources.

Accordingly we moved immediately to help our young people to secure more effective access to worthwhile job opportunities. We did so by introducing programs aimed at creating adequate employment opportunities through economic growth and appropriate government policies as well as by improving the quality and availability of education-training possibilities.

The Government's major priority was the development of economic policies to promote and sustain economic recovery, to get Australia back on its feet, and to increase employment opportunities for all Australians, especially our young people.

Our policies have worked.

Between the Economic Summit in April 1983, and July 1984, seasonally adjusted employment has risen by 260,000. On an actual basis, employment has risen by more than 270,000 and the unemployment rate has fallen by more than $1\frac{1}{2}$ percentage points.

In the period to July 1984 actual employment of young adults and teenagers has risen by 48,800 and the unemployment rate for this group has fallen by 3 percentage points.

The Government is under no illusions. We recognise that still more needs to be done; youth unemployment remains one of the most fundamental issues confronting our nation. Unemployment among our young people does remain disproportionately severe when compared to the rest of the labour force. In July 1984 actual unemployment among those aged 20-24 years seeking full-time or part-time work was 12.1 per cent, and among teenagers 20.0 per cent. These levels of unemployment are unacceptably high.

This situation reflects the fact that over the past two decades there has been a gradual disappearance of lesser-skilled full-time jobs, that the young find it most difficult to find full-time employment in times of economic difficulty and that too few Australian training programs reflect the longer-term skill requirements of the economy.

Sound macro-economic policies are needed to redress the major structural problems apparent in the youth labour market. Such policies must be supplemented by other specifically-targetted Government programs. Recognising this the Government has dramatically increased expenditure on labour market programs to alleviate the immediate impact of unemployment.

Expenditure on employment and training programs has grown from \$533.8 million in 1982/83 to a record level of \$1047.8 million in this year's Budget, an increase of 96 per cent - nearly double over two years.

The Community Employment Program - the Government's major job creation initiative - has given a clear priority to assisting those at greatest disadvantage in obtaining employment. Young people are the major beneficiaries of this program.

Through wage subsidy programs in the private sector, large numbers of long-term unemployed young people are gaining access to employment and work experience. A record 87,500 of those between the ages of 15 or 24 were approved for assistance under the Special Youth Employment Training Program last year, and provision has been made in the 1984-85 Budget to assist a similar number.

Support for apprenticeship is also a priority. While key decisions here obviously remain with the private sector, we are providing increased incentives for apprenticeships and I am pleased to tell you that the intake for 1983/84 was over 40,000 : 16 per cent higher than in the previous year.

But it is on the quality and reach of our education system that our future rests. Appreciating this, the Government has taken immediate steps to counter young people's flagging interest in participation, and to revitalise an education system suffering from years of neglect.

In last month's Budget, we announced a total outlay on education for 1984/85 of over four and a half thousand million dollars.

The Participation and Equity Program is a distinctive and quite crucial element in the approach adopted by the Government.

In tertiary education, we had already in 1983-84 allocated funds to provide an additional 3,000 places in higher education in 1984, with special emphasis on increasing access for people in disadvantaged groups, especially those living outside the metropolitan area.

As a result of the Guidelines to the CTEC recently announced by my colleague, Senator Ryan, a further 15,000 higher education places will be made available over the next three years, together with a further 15,000 in TAFE.

Expenditure will increase by 11.4 per cent overall for tertiary education in 1984/85, with 29.4 per cent for TAFE.

We have also sought to ease the financial burden on students from lower income groups to enable them to complete senior secondary studies and tertiary education:

- In this year's Budget, a total of \$437.3 million was allocated for student assistance schemes, an increase of 17 per cent.

The Government's Guidelines to the Schools Commission for the 1985-88 triennium are a major step forward in schools policy. They represent a major policy initiative in recurrent funding, the first since the implementation of the Karmel Report by the Whitlam Government a decade ago.

Under our policy, funding will be distributed among all schools - government and non-government - to enable them to meet basic resource needs measured by a common community standard.

Expenditure on schools will increase substantially, up 11.6 per cent over 1983/84 and, for the first time, the Commonwealth will provide a legislated four year funding commitment to ensure schools have the confidence and financial stability essential to sound planning.

Our scheme is a major step towards our goal of making educational opportunities more equal. It is projected that funds for government students will increase by nearly 50 per cent by 1992, reflecting the Government's primary obligation to public school systems; non-government schools most in need will also receive substantial improvements in funding levels.

Thus, in the short period since March 1983, this Government has acted swiftly to arrest the decline in prospects facing our youth, moving on both the employment and education fronts to supplement our efforts on the broader macro-economic front. Our initiatives, however, go further than the provision of the resources so vital for the future development of education and training arrangements.

In saying that, I want to remind you not only of the magnitude of the funds now being devoted to education, but also of this Government's concern with the quality and outcomes of education available in Australia : of the need to ensure that Australia receives an effective return for the very substantial resources invested in the education system.

It is a truism to say that Australia's future as a prosperous and competitive nation lies in our youth. Nevertheless, our ability to prosper does depend to a large degree on the skills and ability of our young people : all of you here today have an important role in nurturing those talents.

In a hard, competitive world, we do no service to our young people by throwing them to the wolves, completely unprepared for the responsibilities they are expected to carry. We must face up completely honestly to questions whether the present-day education system is adequate to the task; to whether it is of such quality that we can be confident of our children's future? Frankly, I have my doubts.

The Government is particularly concerned to improve the relevance of the education process to modern day needs, to employment opportunities and to the needs of the economy.

This cannot be achieved in a day, or even a year.

We are determined that while changes must occur, they should be the right changes.

With this in mind, we have initiated a number of major reviews to examine the quality of education in all sectors and levels, to analyse the adequacy and effectiveness of present education and labour market programs in meeting youth needs, and their integration with income support arrangements.

The existing miscellany of programs needs to be incorporated into a comprehensive, co-ordinated strategy, to balance the needs of disadvantaged groups and to ensure that all young people have adequate opportunity to develop the skills and capacities needed both for their own satisfaction as individuals, and to contribute to society's well being. Most importantly we need to develop well-structured training opportunities involving a combination of work experience and formalised training.

One of the reviews contributing to this task is that being undertaken by the Kirby Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs. The Kirby Review is conducting a comprehensive examination of a wide range of existing programs with a view to reporting by the end of this year on necessary improvements in Government policy in relation to labour market requirements of disadvantaged groups. The Committee has already suggested that links between education and labour market programs should be considerably strengthened.

My colleague, Senator Susan Ryan, recently also announced the establishment of a review under Professor Peter Karmel of the quality of education, to report by April 1985.

We want to be sure that satisfactory standards are being achieved by the greater majority of students, and that we have the best possible match between what is taught in schools and tertiary institutions and what is required for success in the workforce.

The Karmel Committee has been asked to advise specifically on a range of issues, including :

- . the priority of obtaining higher basic learning standards in primary schools;
- . the need to ensure that the strong rises now being achieved in participation at senior secondary level are associated with skill standards relevant to employment and tertiary education needs;
- . the need to encourage girls to pursue a wider range of studies more relevant to employment opportunities; and
- . a review of the priority groups meriting special purpose assistance.

In tertiary education, the CTEC will be reporting further on measures needed to improve the overall output of the tertiary education sector, and to maximise its role as a stimulus and catalyst to economic development and restructuring.

The Commission has also been asked to review the Commonwealth's role in TAFE, with particular attention to TAFE's role in developing a skilled workforce, and the need to improve its capacity to respond to change.

The Government is also reviewing current income arrangements for young people; in particular, the inequities and the disincentives to education participation. The long-term result of our review of income support policies for young people should be to make it easier for those young people most in need to obtain the assistance required for them to secure appropriate further education or training.

Let me now comment briefly on some of the basic assumptions made by my Government in its approach to education policy.

This Government was elected to reverse the trend to greater inequality in Australian society, to remedy the ills brought by years of conservative neglect, which were leading to bitter confrontation in many spheres of Australian life.

We have built a new sense of national unity around the restoration of economic growth. We aim to share the benefits and costs of that growth equitably, so that all Australians can take pride and hope in a clear strategy for Australia's future.

Education is an integral part of that strategy and of the Labor Government's commitment to national growth. As a nation we must be prepared to invest heavily in human skills. We need a community and workforce that has the education necessary to cope with and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

We must create a broad base of skills across the whole workforce - through education and training of our young people and through the establishment of necessary retraining facilities for the existing workforce. Only if we equip our people with the capacities and attitudes to compete effectively, with flexibility and with confidence, can we make the most of future opportunities.

In the present day world, with its increasingly sophisticated technologies and the rapid rate of change, people must have the capacity and skill to move with the times, to be flexible, and to be innovative and creative.

Of particular concern to the achievement of these objectives is the fact that the education retention rate in Australia remains one of the lowest in the OECD community.

Despite the very encouraging boost in the upper secondary retention rate which has taken place since this Government came to power (from 36.6 per cent in 1982 to 40.6 per cent last year, with indications of a further rise in 1984), far too many young Australians leave school too early.

This fact has significant implications for the national economy, for the well being of our society, and for those young people for whom the only real alternative to a satisfactory education is months or years on the dole queue.

The Government will continue to give a high priority to improving the retention rate, through programs such as the one to which this Conference is addressing itself.

At the same time, occupational training must become more relevant to the workplace and the needs of young people. This does not mean a narrow training which locks individuals into one narrow occupation. It means across-the-board training, and retraining where necessary.

As I have said several times before, the resuscitation of our education institutions is a sound and vital investment in our future, complementing our policies to restructure Australia's industrial base.

The more efficient use of our human and material resources, and improved competitiveness of our industries will enhance the prospects for our achieving sustained economic growth in the medium and long-term.

The responsibility facing educators, governments and the community is crucial. We must ensure that young people are equipped for the opportunity to participate in society, in employment, and in whatsoever other activities they may choose. We must ensure that the education and training they receive is relevant to today's needs, and that it provides them with the opportunity to develop into well-rounded individuals.

From the initiatives I have described, and other major commitments recently announced in the Government's Guidelines to the two Education Commissions, it is clear that the Government takes this responsibility seriously. The Participation and Equity Program itself is a cornerstone to our efforts, addressing our concerns about equality of opportunities; about more equal outcomes for those traditionally neglected in Australian education and training systems; and about the relevance of schooling and curricula.

The twin objectives of PEP - increased participation in education and greater equity - will be met by bringing about the changes that we are promoting in our education system.

Because the range of abilities, aspirations and backgrounds of secondary students is so wide, we believe that schools need to broaden what they offer in the final secondary years, so that all students, not only those who perform well at traditional, pre-university subjects, can receive an effective and satisfying education.

We believe that PEP will improve participation in education through greater relevance of school curricula and structures in the later years of secondary schools. This will not only provide more relevant experience for disadvantaged young people, but will also contribute to the development of a co-ordinated education and training system which will meet the employment opportunities and challenges associated with economic growth and technological change.

PEP is a very important part of our efforts to achieve these goals. But these changes cannot be achieved with the wave of a magic wand. The implementation of PEP will vary from State to State, community to community, and classroom to classroom.

Those of you who are gathered here at this Conference all have a major role to play in initiating and participating in changes which will be crucial to the success of the program. What you have to do at this Conference is to thrash out the issues, identify the problem areas and come up with the right solutions.

I wish you well in your discussions and have pleasure in declaring this Conference open.
