



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
LAUNCH OF THE OPEN LEARNING AGENCY OF AUSTRALIA'S
INTERNATIONAL TELEVISION PRODUCTION "THE GLOBAL
ECONOMY", PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 16 AUGUST 1994**

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Thank you very much indeed Tony (Pritchard), as Executive Director of Open Learning, Professor Logan, Vice-Chancellor of Monash and David Hill, Managing Director of the ABC and other distinguished representatives of the Embassies that Tony has mentioned and other people who have been dramatically involved with the Open Learning Initiative and ladies and gentlemen.

Well this, of course, is not the only launch today. But, I'll bet pounds to peanuts this one has a longer term influence on Australia than the other one. And, particularly as we are now, I think, as a country so well placed to understand what multi media combinations can do, what telecommunications technology is capable of, to understand that in these instruments we have a device, which fashioned properly, can extend particularly educational learning opportunities to thousands, indeed millions, of people who wouldn't otherwise have had these opportunities available to them.

Australia is, I think, at the forefront of technology change in the western world, particularly in the OECD area, and in my notes there is a reference to the fact that of a survey done recently of many countries in the region, the survey showed that Australians felt more comfortable with technological change than was the case with many of the communities in our region. A chart in the Far Eastern Economic Review last week showed that Australia was the only regional country comfortable with the rate of technological change. By contrast, the people of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand and Japan all thought the rate of technological change was too fast.

I think this is a very encouraging statistic and, I think, it is particularly as we are now starting to learn about broad banded services and convergence and that in not so many years from now we'll work, learn, shop, play and

communicate in ways most of us can't today imagine. We've already developed and are developing networks in Australia and, of course, anyone who goes to automatic teller machines knows that that is so. And, in its myriad forms the information highway has found its way into Australian schools and universities already, into libraries and hospitals, into government departments like DEET, into local governments, and as a consequence, we are really starting to understand its spread and its opportunity.

It is for that reason, with some substantial pleasure that I established, last year, the Broad Band Services Expert Group headed by Brian Johns whose interim report I have now just received. It is a very good report. I think everybody who wants a window into the future should read it. It is an exciting report and one which for all the challenges it presents, should give us confidence that Australia can be at the forefront of change in the global economy and the information highway, because of the fact that we have natural skills in content, in software, just as today we are launching the telecourse "Global Economy". That kind of software product is the sort of thing that Australians are capable of and the information highway is going to be very much about content. The debate now is principally about hardware and whether the cable is going to be rolled out here or there or how many channels can be put on it, but it is essentially about content and we are a content strong country and education has been one of our greatest strengths and one of our primary strengths and it's a matter of exceeding pleasure to me that our educational institutions are right into the information highway and the opportunities to advance learning via these particular technologies.

So, it is against that background I am very pleased to be here today to launch the "Global Economy" and it is, I think, a great example of the quality intellectual merit and international co-operation rolled into one. Let me at this point congratulate the three major Australian players in the enterprise. The ABC whose staff made this co-production with their United States, Swedish and Dutch partners such a success. Monash University and in particular Professor Richard Snape and his colleagues for their distinguished academic contribution and Open Learning for showing that co-operative endeavour and higher education can produce material equal to any in the world.

So, "Global Economy" I think we can say, is a truly global product produced, in the main, by Australians and it will earn export dollars for Australia and more than that it will present to the world the face of Australia in the 1990s. A country with a global perspective and a pervasive belief in learning and innovation.

~~Tony Pritchard~~ said in his introductory remarks that the "Global Economy" and, in a sense, the distance learning movement are heralds of the future. And, when Peter Baldwin first approached me in 1992 about Open Learning and the Open Learning Initiative I thought there was a great opportunity here to establish a facility whereby we could encourage students who may have not qualified for matriculation, who may not for any number of reasons been able to go on to university at a particular time, that we could by the Open Learning Initiative develop curricula where students could join it and, that is,

anyone could enrol in a course regardless of their background, prior experience or educational qualifications and having then succeeded in picking up units in the course, if they wish, stream themselves back into mainstream campus activities. In other words, they get a second go, a second shot at education.

You see how the Government is thinking in these terms. First of all the high participation rates in schools, the additional places in tertiary institutions, then spreading open learning beyond that as a catchment for people who may have dropped out of the system and then building beside the universities the TAFE system so that in vocational education there could also be career opportunities mapped out. Tomorrow we are speaking about that very thing, that is, how students in Years 11 and 12 can start to take on units in TAFE, to start streaming themselves and get TAFE accreditation for their longer run education.

So, there is an exciting panoply of options there and a large part of that, I think, apart from just the primary strengths of the participation and the higher commitment to places in tertiary institutions in this country, I think, that the Open Learning Initiative and Open Learning has a tremendous potential and particularly for students who don't, because of parental circumstances or geographical circumstances, can't find it easy for themselves to get themselves into mainstream tertiary education or tertiary institutions.

Now, the White Paper on employment and growth - Working Nation - was also at pains to stress Australia's future depends on ideas, skills and knowledge of the workforce. And, if we are to be a high value added export oriented economy, we need to continually upgrade our skills and we will also need to find new and more effective ways of developing skills into the future. In all of this, I think, it is incumbent upon us to take responsibility for our own learning and this is where, I think, distance learning again comes through with flying colours. Through distance learning programs such as Open Learning anyone interested can learn about economics through productions such as this one or learn a language, gain skills in statistics and marketing or learn more about our own history.

One of distant learning's great strengths is that it can help break down the artificial barriers between various education and training sectors. It is going to take a lot of the, if you like, formality and structure out of our educational structures and institutions. Just as businesses are increasingly making use of outsourcing and telecommuting, Open Learning is increasingly utilising information technologies and telecommunication advances to expand educational services in the home and the office. Distance learning techniques have also important applications for entry level training, for youth education as I made a point a moment ago, and for the training market in general. I was very pleased to see the ABC's rivals at SBS offering vocational oriented training in diverse fields such as health, education and journalistic ethics. I could make a little contribution to that software package myself, maybe that's something I can do later.

Not surprisingly, Open Learning's flexibility and strong client focus, I mean, I think these words are important - flexibility and strong client focus - pose challenge for our more traditional educational institutions. I think that is why, I mean, I'm not just simply mouthing words here saying, I think, that is why it is exceedingly encouraging that the main stream institutions are interested in this challenge. The challenge being posed for flexibility and a stronger client focus away from formal structures. Students can now study at times which suit them and they can study in various settings. It doesn't matter if you are from a rural area or you want to study specialist subjects not taught nearby or have disabilities that prevent easy access to classroom study - Open Learning comes to you. And, the fact that of course it lets anybody enrol, makes quality education more accessible to the many groups in society not well served by traditional forms of education and it gives access to Australia's best institutions, lecturers and tutors.

Open Learning is inclusive accessible learning, but we want to make it even more accessible and that is why the second stage of the Government's Open Learning Initiative is the new Electronic Support Service. This service will enable students to communicate with tutors and other students through electronic mail to search library catalogues and to access course and administrative information.

Eventually, the service will enable educational institutions and industry to access national and international education and training programs for use in workplace training. We can already see that with programs such as Internet where people are already accessing Internet and drawing quite a lot of data out of it for particular areas of educational research.

Access points will be established in community based centres around Australia to ensure that all students have access to the service. I mean, I just think this is a terribly exciting thing that a student can go to a point in a suburb and then have this communication with a tutor or the institution in the broad.

By putting Australian education and training onto the information super highways it will put more education and training at the fingertips of more Australians. And, of course, I think we all know that our future as a country is going to be more and more in areas of added value, of education, of change, of continual retraining and, of course, in flexibility and less formalisation in the way education is delivered.

So, it is about equipping our children with the education, skills and infrastructure that will allow them to create a future for themselves. It is about building a future that is more secure. So, perhaps let me conclude by saying how gratifying it is that the concept of Open Learning is gaining widespread acceptance. Its educational advantages are quickly being recognised, but it doesn't surprise me as I have said many times in recent years, this country is profoundly capable of change for the better and the embrace of change in Australia in the last decade or so has, I think, been profound and why should we not think that we can meet the challenge of the revolution in information

and in technology when we so successfully have met the challenge of the global economy? When we are successfully meeting the challenge of the region. When we have learned that there is nothing to fear and so much to gain from having the courage to embrace change and the wit to manage it. So much to lose by retreating from it.

But, providing such a practical and positive answer to these rhetorical questions, I thank the Open Learning Agency of Australia and all the other people associated with this production. It is a marvellous, again, collaborative initiative by the educational institutions, by the ABC, it continues to demonstrate it's changing its role in this country, by the Government, and of course, here particularly with collaboration with other production units abroad and we certainly applaud that kind of collaboration.

Let me congratulate all involved, particularly the three people represented here on the rostrum for getting out there and catching the wave that is now with us that lets Australians say that the information highway is a great opportunity for Australia, that we are strong in education and we are strong on software and that we will master this technology and be first amongst equals in getting out there on the highway with the sort of products as we've seen today. But in doing that, make sure that that highway starts at home and that the first wave of people to benefit from it are Australians who can take up the opportunities that formalised structures in the past have denied them.

Congratulations to one and all.