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PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
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AS: It's easy for us Australians to pull down the so-called tall poppies - do you think that energy would be better spent paying tribute to our great achievers?

PM: Well, getting poppies up is what it is all about, and there has been a lot of concentration on tertiary education in this country - and not unreasonably - but seeing people come through with real attainment's in vocational education is wonderful for them, the institutions and the country.

AS: One of the first things you did as Prime Minister in the vocational education and training area was push for the establishment of a national body - why was this such an important goal?

PM: Because vocational education, or TAFE, has been the Cinderella of Australian education, and we had 60% of the output of our Year 12 students coming out other than into tertiary education and many of them being left untrained. The point of getting TAFE up to a National system, and giving it national standing was so that anyone with a vocational certificate should have not just an equal, but perhaps even better chance of finding work and standing in educational terms in the community, but to do that we had to bring TAFE together as a national system. And so the Australian National Training Authority was a device we used to do that.

AS: Because TAFE courses and vocational training are often compared to universities and schools - does the former get the recognition that it deserves, from the Government?

- PM: It's getting it from the Government, but it hasn't had the standing and the recognition in the community. And this is a great pity because often the people who are trained, more often than not indeed, the people who are trained vocationally are entirely useful, and immediately useful to their employer, and they can start charting strong career paths for themselves. There is a bit of snobbery still about a tertiary education, where in fact the strength and the diversity of courses now in TAFE really gives us a tremendous opportunity to bring the whole vocational education system up, and to give young people a real chance to not only set a career path, but change it when they feel like it to do something else, and to keep that relevance to work.
- AS: You have often connected the future of young Australians to the Asian market, telling students to get smart, get a job and help us win markets in Asia. On the eve of the APEC Forum, how important are skills to get us into Asia?
- PM: They are entirely important. Australia's great comparative advantage in the Asia-Pacific is its education system - there is no country in Asia with an education system as strong as ours. And selling innovative product, elaborately transformed goods, internationally traded services, are all the things that Australia can do if we can open these markets up. The point of APEC is to open all these markets up, but then we have to follow through, and of course, we will follow through better if we have a trained and skilled workforce. Again, all the roads lead back to vocational education.
- AS: We are already technologically smart and leaders in some of these fields - how far can we go?
- PM: Australian pure research and applied research and innovation is really at the cutting edge. What we have now got to do is improve our marketing and our access to markets, and Australia is now concentrating on the Asia-Pacific, and market access as never before. So, if the Government keeps a premium on education and training and particularly in those areas where the premium hasn't existed in full before - such as TAFE and vocational education - then we will be in first-rate shape to really fully participate in this growth.
- AS: Finally Prime Minister, do you have a personal note to the finalists of the Awards tonight?
- PM: Well first of all I would like to congratulate each and every one of them. Those who are coming through as trainees, who have come through a certificate course, to those who are the trainers, to the institutions - this is the sort of acknowledgment I am glad to see being attached to TAFE and vocational education because Universities are very strong now, and they're strong enough to look after themselves, so I don't mind

saying that I am a TAFE champion - I'm a vocational education person, and so tonight is the sort of recognition that I am very pleased to see.

AS: You're a dad too, what about encouragement to the parents of the students here tonight?

PM: I think parents are now getting onto TAFE. I think they are understanding that there are tremendous career paths here, and that students can change them and there is that view that if your child...you have ambition for them becoming university students, and perhaps they don't, there is going to be a system sitting beside the universities just as strong, and just as good, and I think that is a very optimistic point for many Australian parents today.

AS: And a good point on which to end. Thank you very much for your time today.

PM: Thank you.

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