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PRIME MINISTER

**ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP,
OPENING OF BUILDING 8 – RMIT, MELBOURNE, WEDNESDAY, 5 JULY
1995**

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today at RMIT to open Building 8.

It is an extraordinary building.

It's conceivable that some people might hate it; but I think it suits the environment – and I'm persuaded that it definitely suits its educational and cultural purposes.

It's slightly mad, but so are the city baths up the road.

It's bright and this part of Melbourne needs it – and it kisses goodbye to both the modern hideous glass towers and Victorian heaviness and hang-ups.

I like it – and I congratulate Peter Corrigan and Maggie Edmond.

I hope they will come up to Sydney some time.

Our cities always need a bit of cross-fertilization.

I also must pay tribute to two other people: Ruth Duncan, the Director of Physical Planning and Construction; and your Vice Chancellor, David Beanland who recognised that Edmond and Corrigan's building might be just the flagship RMIT needed: an image of optimism and change; an image of Australia in the 21st century.

And I gather that already it is effectively conveying that message in Asia and Europe.

We have seen an outdated building transformed into a significant contribution to Australian architecture and education.

Old facilities have been improved and modernised to include state of the art educational technology.

What we have now is a bold and challenging building which serves as an outstanding educational resource and statement about the direction of Australian culture.

And the direction of RMIT – it will be the flagship of the Institution, connecting it with the city, a focus and a resource for its activities, an expression of its perspective on the future.

This building can also be seen as a symbol of the dramatic changes that have occurred in education and training over the past decade.

RMIT is proof of the potential which exists when the two essential elements of tertiary education, TAFE and universities, are linked.

Since the education reforms in 1988, Australian post-compulsory education has undergone extraordinary changes and expansion.

The previous separation of TAFE and higher education, which restricted the access of the less advantaged to many forms of skills development, is now being broken down.

It is becoming recognised that the distinctions between vocational and academic education are essentially arbitrary and accidents of history and inertia.

We have massively expanded the Australian higher education system – it now enrolls more than 30 per cent of all 17 to 22 year olds.

Participation in formal education and training by people aged 15–24 has increased from around 44 per cent in 1985 to around 53 per cent in 1992.

Commonwealth funding available to higher education has risen from \$3 billion in 1983 to \$4.8 billion in 1995 – an increase of almost 61 per cent.

It is of great importance to reflect on the circumstances which have enabled the higher education system to expand so rapidly in recent times, and worth noting how substantial the growth has been.

Since the reforms of 1989, manifested in part in the considerable developments at RMIT, there has been a 40 per cent increase in the number of Australian higher education students.

The reason this has been possible is to be found in a four letter word which appears in no dictionary: HECS.

Revenue from the Higher Education Contribution Scheme over the last 5 years has been used only to enable the system to grow.

This has meant that up to one out of every three students today would not otherwise be here.

The students demonstrating about higher education charging policy might ask themselves if it is reasonable to protest against such an extraordinary expansion in higher education?

It does seem fair to have former students pay around 23 per cent of taxpayers' subsidy, if and only when they reach average earnings?

And it is worth noting that this Australian approach, a world first, is now being copied in many other countries – the US, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Canada and Botswana, for example.

Dare I suggest to the demonstrating students that it was our Opponents in the last election supported the introduction of full up-front undergraduate fees.

HECS is only one of many innovations we have embraced.

The Government is in the process of redefining education and training to reflect new forms of working and learning.

We are not living in a static environment.

Types of work, the way we work, the way we learn and the ways we teach, and what we learn and teach, are all changing.

We need to be flexible and adaptive, innovative and – much over-used though the word is – competitive.

Education and training are the bridges which will enable individuals to cross over from obsolete skills to skills of the future; from poorly paid employment to well-paid; from unemployment to work.

It will enable people to get jobs and hold on to them, as training and re-training become career-long experiences for all workers.

If it is a bridge for individuals, it is also a bridge for Australia itself – from the 20th to the 21st century.

Of course, it is not enough to create new buildings – what happens inside those buildings must also be innovative and dynamic.

I know RMIT is well placed to meet this challenge.

It stands out as an institution of character.

With higher education and vocational education combined in one institution, RMIT embodies the great change in modern education – that is, the old divisions between school, vocational education and higher education no longer apply.

I have been told that RMIT aims for practicality, excellence, relevance and responsiveness – seeking ways to continually improve its organisational design in pursuit of its educational objectives and welcome people from a wide range of cultural, social and educational backgrounds.

The RMIT Mission Statement specifically identifies the need to be at the forefront of technical and professional education of the kind which develops people for employment and focuses on research programs that address real world issues.

They tell me that RMIT is also relentless in its efforts to ensure that it keeps pace with technological change.

This all sounds very good to me – and it will be even better if RMIT never loses sight of the fact that its first responsibility – its most fundamental responsibility – is to teach students well.

The issue does not go away with the new technology.

Australians have shown a remarkable capacity to embrace new technology.

More than 40 per cent of Australian households have their own personal computers, second in the world only to the United States.

Australians also have one of the highest per-capita rates of use of Internet in the world.

And there is no doubt that the university and research community has led the nation in the development of computer networks.

But, as I said when I launched the report of the Broadband Services Expert Group earlier this year, the information society is not just about acquiring the new technology.

It is about how we choose to use technology to take us to a more democratic and equitable society and a more knowledgeable and creative one.

The great challenge is to make sure that the new communications technologies enrich and strengthen us.

Nowhere is the impact of information technology, particularly multimedia and networks, going to be greater than in the field of education.

Education must keep up.

Education must prepare young Australians for life in an information society.

This will require imagination from our educators and planners in the development of curricula and the provision of infrastructure.

Building 8 houses some fine examples of how educational institutions can embrace the technology.

The RMIT Library is linked into world wide electronic information networks.

Students of fashion and textile design learn with the aid of a computer laboratory and specialist machine workrooms.

State-of-the-art educational technology is a feature of the teaching methods used in the Bachelor of Applied Science in Mathematics, and in teaching Engineering, Applied Science and many other subjects.

The computer laboratories on Level 9 of this building are some of the busiest teaching areas at RMIT.

And RMIT's Department of Visual Communications is offering Diploma and Masters courses in Interactive Multimedia and Animation.

The Government has taken a particular interest in new communications technologies.

We recognise the challenge: if we let it, the technology can be dehumanising, alienating, and counterproductive to our educational purposes; but if we are clever we can use it to strengthen the bonds between us, deepen the pool of our collective knowledge and raise our level of mutual understanding.

We must pursue policies which ensure that existing injustices are not intensified by unequal access to knowledge.

And we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the technology will ever be a substitute for thinking, writing, knowing, working, deciding and doing.

We have been making great progress.

In April, I announced that the Government would develop and implement a national strategy for information services and technologies.

The strategy is being coordinated through a whole-of-government approach - particularly in the formation of national policy and the Government's own use of technologies.

Two weeks ago I announced the membership of the National Information Services Council – a high level discussion group to provide the Government with a range of views on marketplace developments, technical issues and community views on the opportunities and challenges that the evolving services and technologies will present.

I am delighted that Professor Beanland has agreed to serve as one of the members of the Council.

Another aspect of the strategy is the establishment of a national education network.

Through agreement between the Commonwealth Government and the States and Territories, Education Network Australia, or EdNA, has been launched by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training.

EdNA will:

- encompass all sectors of education including schools, vocational education and training, and higher education;
- equip students and their teachers to participate effectively in the information society, regardless of location or socio-economic status;
- deliver educational services and products across the nation;
- provide an overarching framework for the vast array of cooperative smaller scale projects throughout Australia; and
- ensure that governments work together to achieve the best and most cost effective outcomes for our education system.

A further component of the National Strategy was unveiled last week by the Minister for Social Security.

Aimed at bridging the gap between the "information rich" and "information poor" in Australia, the Community Information Network has been established to provide free access to government and community information and communication facilities and services.

Initially, this access is being provided through 100 Local Access Points situated in DSS offices, libraries and community organisations.

The Government aims to rapidly increase the number of access points over coming months.

Another area where the government has been very active is in the development of multimedia.

Multimedia's combination of text, pictures, sound and static and moving images takes information technology into another realm, offering unique interactive learning and cultural experiences.

We believe Australia has a real opportunity to develop a world competitive multimedia industry, particularly in the provision of content.

Fortunately, we have in place many of the necessary ingredients – in our creative people, our technical expertise, our well established film and television industry and educational institutions like RMIT.

The development of an Australian multimedia industry was one of the aims of the Government's 1994 Cultural Policy Statement, *Creative Nation*.

The Australian Multimedia Enterprise has been established and will now oversee the development of multimedia projects with the assistance of \$45 million provided by the Commonwealth.

I am aware that RMIT is working on the establishment of an Interactive Information Institute – a research facility dedicated to applied research into the multimedia and telecommunications industries.

This proposal is typical of the sort of interaction the government is trying to encourage – where the best creative minds of our universities are combined with the investment power and market knowledge of the private sector.

And let me say that I am delighted RMIT is playing such a prominent part in the process.

I am delighted specifically because it is a significant element in RMIT's involvement in developing this northern end of Melbourne as an educational precinct.

Historically, of course that is what it has been – a sort of knowledge precinct – and RMIT's development will revive the tradition for the 21st century.

It is therefore good for Melbourne, and while I am from Sydney and for all its warts and what they've done to it, love the place – I am also seriously enamoured of Melbourne.

If my words aren't enough, know me by my deeds.

In *Creative Nation* we put the International Music Academy here, an arm of the Australia Council, the Foundation for Australian Cultural Development, the

Special Television Production Fund, and we put half a million into the MSO with the message – divest from the ABC if you want to.

Not everyone in Melbourne noticed all these things, but everyone in Sydney did.

To me there are unmistakable signs that Melbourne is on the rise again.

It is going to end this century and enter the next one very strong culturally and economically.

This development will play a profound part in the process – all the more so if you can make something elegant out of the old CUB site up there.

Thank you for having me here today.

ENDS