



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOOD UNIVERSITIES
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Well thank you very much Paul [Kelly]. It is good to see you back in the portals of Parliament House after all those years here. But still having an influence on the debate as Editor of The Australian and, of course, a very particular influence in terms of the coverage by The Australian newspaper of education. As you say, your Wednesday supplement which is the place where I am sure most people in Australian education go to read about their industry and what is happening with it.

But could I acknowledge Dean Ashenden and Sandra Milligan who are with us, the authors of the Good Universities Guides; Professor Logan, Vice-Chancellor of Monash; Professor John Hay, from Deakin; Professor Serjeantson, the Acting Vice-Chancellor of the ANU; and, Professor Wilmoth from the RMIT, where I was yesterday. It is good to have you along, all of you.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to do these two things - launch the Good Universities Guides and to present the 1995 University of the Year Award.

I am particularly impressed with the Guide, it says at the first line, "All nformation needed to answer the two big questions. Which course? Which campus?" and then it goes through to describe the universities, the courses, how you get in, how difficult it is for entry, what sort of courses on offer and, if you have completed a course, what sort of standing it has. These sorts of issues.

And I think what is particularly pleasing to me about it is that a decade or so ago you wouldn't have needed this Guide because there just wasn't so many people in the system and the fact that we have recognised that Australia's great comparative advantage is its education system and that our greatest resource is the creativity of our young people, of our students.

Just knowing that fact, just a country coming to terms with that particular fact, is important in itself. Rather than, perhaps, the sense of the cargo cult with another paddock full of wheat, or another mountain of iron ore will do the trick. Rather, we are saying no, no, what will do the trick is to exploit the thing which is of greatest value to all of us and that is the creativity of our young people and the growth of our education system and focussing the very great ability of our educators and putting a premium on their capacity to educate.

I think it is this, the notion that we wish to be a clever country, but more than that, rather than simply the amenity of technological capacity or wealth. Just this question about the liberation which education brings, the sense of democracy, the inter-generational opportunities. It is the great bridge in Australian society from wherever one is from, in socio-economic terms, to wherever one wants to go. You can go there by crossing this bridge and that is why there has been such a singular commitment by the Government over 12 years to education.

As a consequence, we have now got just on 600,000 people in higher education, compared to 325,000 in the middle 1980s - a 60 per cent increase. It is just a phenomenal number. One of the things which pleases us about it, and part of the reason we can keep the numbers up is that we have made big financial commitments and by introducing quite revolutionary schemes like HECs - equitable, democratic schemes like HECs - where we are asking students to refund, when they reach average weekly earnings, 23 per cent of the cost of the course. When it comes back 100 per cent of it goes to other students.

I noticed yesterday there were a group of students demonstrating against HECs and other things at RMIT, where I was. But a third of them out the front wouldn't have been there without HECs, which is a point lost on them I am sure. But it is, I think, a very great innovation and many other countries are now coming to pick it up. And it is equitable, it works through the tax system, you don't need to pay anything until you get to average weekly earnings and, yet, all of it goes back into higher participation rates in education.

I think that the option of higher education, something that is within the view of most students, is a great thing. When I went to school, when I completed the Intermediate Certificate in New South Wales, there were only very few students I went to school with who had any expectation of going to universities. In my day, people didn't know about them and despite the scholarships which were around and many people in this room would have been advantaged by the scholarships of the day, the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, it was in the end, nevertheless, a fairly elite system covering too few people. And, hence, you know something like this Guide would have been basically unnecessary because there wasn't the sense that everybody had the opportunity of going.

I think the other thing that pleases me about the change in participation rates in schools and higher education, is the opportunities it has brought to women, to young women, to girls to stay in higher education and then join that throughput, so that we are now getting about the same throughput out of the higher

education system that any comparable industrial country, like Australia, would have.

And part of that stream, which is about 40 per cent I think of the people who complete and graduate from Year 12, about 40 per cent of that stream go through higher education and, of course now I think a majority of them are young women, which is a great thing. It means that whatever people think about the glass ceiling, the reality of it, the prejudice in the system, or the absence of opportunity, the mere fact that education is going to be spread so widely amongst women and the higher education opportunities are going to be there, it means there is no ceiling which will contain them. In other words, they won't be looking for the favour, they will simply take it and that is what I think is important - giving them the capacity to go and grab it.

So this is a very revolutionary change for us all and one that is now powering along in the society we have, making it stronger and fairer and more equitable, and giving us a chance to, in fact, see the universities become not simply providers of education, but businesses in themselves.

I know there is a debate about this, but I am sure we are well able to keep this balance between the core responsibilities and core tasks of a university and their capacity to do things, which at the same time advance the economy and advance their place in it.

I noticed yesterday at RMIT that being shown through the IT areas of university, one can see that what was on offer was something that was likely not to be repeated in too many places, not only in Australia, but around the world. And you can see the obvious commerciality, or the commercial opportunities, that the courses have on offer. And we have seen this in so many other ways and in so many other fields as we have seen universities change over the period.

I would like to also just mention that - just in terms of through-put - in the Budget of this year, we added another 11,000 places to higher education, and I think that commitment, again, just underpins the fact that there is no complacency on the Government's part about the challenge with higher education, and keeping resources up to it. The other area, I think, that we in the Government are particularly interested in, and I know higher education institutions are interested in too, and that is the inter-face with TAFE. And again, at RMIT yesterday we saw Universities and TAFE vocational education sitting beside one another. And the capacity for people to stream themselves through TAFE to University, to undertake Diploma's, to gather for themselves accreditation for particular courses in Universities is, I think, a very welcome trend and it means that the traditional ways we thought about higher education are going to change, and that the career paths of students, or the paths of students rather, is going to be different than it has been in the past.

The Cinderella of Australian education, of course, has been TAFE, and it is a great challenge now before us with the training agenda so much on the Government's minds - through *Working Nation* and the traineeships etc - to be able to lift the capacity of vocational educational so that the 60% of people who

don't go to higher education are not cascading into a labour market to which they are unsuited - where job opportunities are curtailed, or constrained, and where the large majority of them are untrained, which not long ago was the case - still the case, in fact. We're now getting to a point where, we have now - the Commonwealth - since *One Nation* we have put \$1.2 billion into TAFE, into vocational education, and through ANTA, we expect to be able to tie the TAFE systems of the State's together with vocational certificates, which will then have currency across the country. And where, at the same time, outside the formality of the state TAFE systems, develop a private training market, where in particular areas, we can see private trainers being provided, and in particular localities, where industries need a specific focus for training needs, we can see them coming together and operating the training market. Getting business involved in vocational education is, I think, the way for us, so that the labour market demands have far more influence on the product of vocational education, than does simply the providers - the traditional providers - of education. This is, I think, a very exciting change for us, and I was pleased to see the take up in vocational education in the last year as well, so that there is a lot of discernment out there on the part of students about what may be advantageous to them and the labour market, whether they are, in fact, they are better off in higher education, or they are better off specialising through vocational education. I mean, they are getting very canny about those choices, which means the sophistication of the system is rising.

Now, I think again, this is where the guide will matter, because I am quite sure that the most interested student just can't know about the courses which are on offer, the choices, the combinations that are on offer around the country. And with such a great stock of people now seeking a place in higher education, we really need to have, I think, this sort of information available so that the whole panoply of opportunities is made clear, and at the same time, I think - though I haven't read it comprehensively - there is also some guide in here to vocational education as well. I think that's very good.

In looking through the Guide, for instance on a University - talking about a University - how they rate and compare - status and standing, they have stars. Quality committee views - stars; research track record - stars; getting in, toughness to get in, and there's a guide; flexibility of entry - there's a guide; places for school-leavers - there's a guide; admission for TAFE graduates - there's a guide; the global connection, international students - there's a guide. And then it goes to teaching - quality committee view, teaching innovation, library holding, graduates course ratings, and then what's on offer - the breadth of offering: a vocational orientation, external study. And then the payoff - getting a job, proceed to further studies, starting salary etc. In other words, it's the sort of guide that a young person needs - or not even a young person - coming to look at a university. So I think it's a terrific piece of work, I really do, and congratulations for it.

I have got two pleasant duties to do - one is to launch this, the other is to announce the University of the Year. Now, we boast now a great number of Universities. In 1995, the focus of this award has been on the integration of information and communications technologies into undergraduate education. Now, I think the information highway - which we hear about now every day,

more than one time a day most days - has enormous potential as an educational tool. And I suppose it is probably in Universities and in educational institutions where there is a fascination with the information highway because of the amenity which it can obviously provide for teaching. We can use it to increase the curriculum choices offered to students, and we can use it to transport ideas and knowledge around the country to people who live on the margins of our society, and it is obviously one of the instruments in Open learning. Some Universities are already exploring it - I mentioned RMIT yesterday with a raft of courses and the ANU has created a sophisticated network which is fully accessible to undergraduates - a virtual campus in itself. But the University making the best use of the new technologies, and the winner of the Good Universities Guide 1995 University of the Year Award is Deakin University. Deakin uses the information highway to provide world-class distance education - when the student can't come to the University, Deakin takes the University to the student. Deakin students work from mines and factories and offices, as well as from classrooms and lecture theatres, but through the use of computers and e-mail and faxes and printed materials, they engage in the dialogue that is the hallmark of the traditional university education. Deakin is an unconventional university, but of course, a good one. And I might say, that it is an illustration of the success of the Government's higher education reforms that the Australian University of the Year in 1995 doesn't have a single block of sandstone to its name.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to extend my congratulations to Deakin, the Vice Chancellor is here, of course, to acknowledge that, and also again, repeat my appreciation and congratulations for the publication of this document. Let me again repeat those congratulations to Dean Ashenden and Sandra Milligan, and also to Paul Kelly, the editor of The Australian, because I think no newspaper has tracked the course of Australian education quite like The Australian has, and now with these continuing innovations coming through in higher education, in vocational education - as we are seeing such a ferment and flux in our higher education and vocational institutions - having the national newspaper chart it, record it, talk about it, debate it, is, I think, the sort of thing that newspapers are there to do. To be papers of record, to put information put there that people genuinely need and garner, and where they can understand better about what they are doing relative to other people. So, perhaps I can conclude my remarks by saying that in recent times I never seem to be out of universities and vocational institutions. It is a great pleasure to me that we continue to just power on in this area, and let me assure you that the Government will be keeping the resources up to the sector, because it is our great comparative advantage - it is our great hope, it is our great liberating force, it is one of the most democratic tools we have in our society, and I am delighted to be involved again with some of the key people who are fashioning this change in Australia. Thank you.

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