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PRIME MINISTER

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP - AUSTRALIAN SKILL OLYMPICS TEAM FAREWELL SYDNEY, 6 OCTOBER 1995

I'm very happy to be in Sydney today to farewell the Australian team for the 33rd International Skill Olympics. More than 6000 young people from across the continent competed for positions on the team, so you should feel extremely proud of your selection.

Of course, you won't get as much media coverage as those more glamorous Olympians who are going to Atlanta next year. But your efforts in Lyon will be no less significant, the message you bear at least as profound.

In fact, from a national perspective, Lyon is the main game. In Lyon the mettle of Australian industry will in no small way be tested.

Lyon is the main game because, increasingly, education and training matters like nothing else.

The world is changing - visibly, quickly, inexorably.

Trade walls are falling over, capital markets are shaking themselves free of regulation, transport and telecommunications developments are outstripping each other, countries are at once more interlinked and interdependent and more competitive.

And the story of work is being rewritten.

The US commentator, Peter Drucker, has written that at the end of the twentieth century, a new society is emerging: the knowledge society. It is a society where the key resource is not capital or labour, but knowledge.

The forces driving this transformation are bigger than all of us. If we adapt to the changes we will prosper - if we don't, we'll founder.

We can catch the wave in to the shore, or we can let it wash over us and leave us behind.

In a knowledge society, Australia has to own the knowledge – Australians have to earn it. And to do that, we have to invest in education and training.

We have to invest in formal education, and not just because formal education delivers formal knowledge. Formal education teaches people how to learn. It begets the capacity to acquire skills on the job.

And having formal education and informal skills demonstrably helps individuals and, in turn, companies and countries, to adopt and adapt to new technologies. Which is the essential prerequisite, of economic growth and wealth acquisition in the modern world.

Education and skills are essential in the challenge of the new technologies and new information. They are the essential means of coping with the uncertainty of change and turning it to our advantage.

We shouldn't forget that education is not just about economic efficiency: education linked to informal on the job training is the key to individual prosperity and well being.

Government involvement in education is – like it always has been – the best kind of intervention to create individual opportunity where inherited economic circumstances would otherwise deny it.

Education and skills development have a profound social dimension as well as an economic one – they are essential to our success in the world economy and essential to our becoming a fairer and genuinely more democratic society.

Pursuing an education is the most important thing a young person can do. A good education is the best guarantee of an interesting job. It holds the most promise for a prosperous life.

Nothing is more important to Australia and Australians than education, and I can safely say that nothing is more important to the Australian Government. We have no greater responsibility.

Over the last decade we have done a lot towards renovating Australia's education and training sectors.

Since 1990, we have doubled spending on vocational education: from \$344 million in 1990 to \$779 million in 1995.

We have established the National Employment and Training Taskforce (NETTFORCE) to increase industry's commitment to traineeships – and last year, apprentice and traineeship commencements as a proportion of the 15–19 year old population were higher than that achieved in any of the previous three decades.

We have increased participation in universities from 340,000 students in 1982 to 600,000 today – and greatly improved school retention rates – from 36% in 1982 to 75% in 1994.

We are on our way to ensuring that by the year 2001, 95% of 19 year olds will have completed Year 12 or an initial post-school qualification or are participating in formal education and training.

The last decade has witnessed a sea change in the Australian education and training sector. You can sense the change when you talk to people, when you visit their workplaces, when you see the things they make and the services they provide.

Australia is a livelier place now, more alert and energetic – with a much larger future.

So we have come a long way.

But we have not come far enough.

We must provide *better* education – to *more* Australians. And we must provide them with *continuous* education – because the knowledge they will need to survive is always changing.

The sector which has seen the greatest amount of change – and the greatest rate of change – is the communications sector.

The development of the new information technologies offers new opportunities for Australians – but only for Australians with the right training.

There will be new industries to develop, and new economies in which to work. But if we are to maximise the benefits we derive from the new information age – if we are to suck out all the value and all the jobs – then we have to ensure that our young people understand the new technologies.

That's why the Government is investing in a comprehensive education network service, called EdNA, to ensure all students and teachers are equipped for the information society.

That's also why I'm glad to see that WorkSkill Australia has played an important role in the inclusion of a Global Multimedia Challenge as part of this year's Skill Olympics.

In this and other ways, WorkSkill Australia has done a superb job in co-ordinating Australia's effort for the Skill Olympics. Over the years, the organisation, led so energetically by Jack Dusseldorp, has enabled nearly 30,000 young Australians to test their skills in qualifying events for the Olympic team.

Last year's inaugural Australian Training Awards recognised the great contribution made by WorkSkill Australia to vocational education and training.

Congratulations to the people at WorkSkill Australia. And I must not let pass the opportunity to congratulate Jack Dusseldorp on his nomination for the Presidency of the International Organisation for the Promotion of Vocational Training and International Youth Skill Olympics.

Most importantly, I want to congratulate the competitors we are farewelling today.

Good luck to you all. We will be watching your progress keenly, and willing you on to victory – for yourselves and your families, but also for Australia.