Chapter 1

NSW – Leading Australia’s Learning
Report of the consultation on future directions for public education and training: One size doesn't fit all
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The foundation of every state is the education of its youth.

Diogenes Laertius (3rd Century AD)

Education is the key to the State’s growth, the intellectual capital of its people, the future quality of life of its citizens, the engagement of people in productive and personally satisfying endeavour and the international competitiveness of the State and of Australia as a whole. There is also an abiding recognition that NSW public education has helped shape the democracy of Australia, the values of its citizens and the spirit of the nation.

For these reasons, successive state governments have made ever increasing investments in education and training.

For the same reasons, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) recognises the need for public education and training to be responsive to the expectations and challenges of a dynamic social and economic environment, to make the changes and build the capacity required to keep the state system and the State ahead of the game.

THE FUTURES PROJECT

To ensure education and training in this State confronts the systemic and professional challenges of best possible educational delivery in the 21st century, and in a spirit of genuine consultation with the community and stakeholders, DET has committed to a robust, comprehensive and open process of feedback, reflection and direction setting.

The Futures project, the product of that commitment, is a unique process in education in Australia for the scale and scope of its reach, and for the honesty and transparency of its process.

The Futures project is based on a determination and a need for NSW public education and training to be leading Australia’s learning. With one third of the nation’s public education students in NSW government schools and around 9% of the population of NSW aged 15 to 64 enrolled in TAFE at any one time, the future of education and training in this State is truly the future of education and training for the nation.

The Futures project was established in 2004 by the Director-General with the ultimate aim being to improve student outcomes but also to answer some fundamental questions:

- Do the students, parents, industry and wider community get the quality services and outcomes they are seeking?
- Can we improve our education system and, if so, how?

The Process

The first step in the project was to establish a dialogue with DET’s community as to the priorities, principles and potential strategies that could guide the organisation over the next 5 to 10 years. The assumption was that DET’s customers, the community of NSW, and its employees are well qualified to judge the organisation’s current performance and help inform its future direction.

Preliminary discussions with key stakeholder groups occurred and from the feedback received, a discussion paper, Excellence and Innovation was produced in September 2004, which formed the basis of much wider consultations.
The project has consulted a very broad sample of the education and training community. Over two and a half thousand written submissions were received and analysed both internally by education experts and externally by independent text analysis undertaken by the University of New South Wales. Teachers, parents and students from schools and TAFE Institutes across the State have shared their thoughts in response to wide-ranging questions. Industry representatives, school and TAFE administrative staff, preschool providers, senior executive staff members in regions, Institutes and State Office, interested spectators and all major stakeholder groups have contributed their views. In all, over 28,500 people provided opinion on DET’s current position and future direction. (A detailed outline of the project’s methodology is provided at Appendix 1.)

Key Findings
Two significant messages became apparent:

- There is pride in the many achievements of the public education and training system
- From this pride, there is a deep desire for DET to improve its operations.

By far the majority of respondents felt that DET should become more flexible, more adaptive and responsive, and more innovative to better meet present and future challenges. There was a palpable eagerness for change in order to ensure improvement. There was a passionate desire for DET to build on its considerable successes and be the preferred education provider through the early decades of the 21st century and beyond. There was strong acknowledgement that for this to occur, change was essential.

Rationale for Change

This State is serious about educating its children, young people and adults. After health, education and training represents the largest proportion of State government spending, consuming almost a quarter of the NSW State budget. As the body that administers public schools and TAFE, DET has a total organisation budget of $9.6 billion in 2004/05.

It is both timely and appropriate that the public education and training system in NSW be prepared to undertake a wholesale, public examination of its strengths and weaknesses and to seek fresh ways to strengthen its abundant capacity to be the leading education system in Australia.

The Current System

DET is a huge organisation, the largest in Australia and one of the biggest education providers in the world.

- DET enrols two out of every three school students in NSW.
- Some 745,508 (FTE) students attended 2,244 government schools across the State in 2004.
- In 2004, approximately 200,600 of these students (27%) identified as having a language background other than English; approximately 35,200 (5%) identified as Indigenous; and over 35,000 (5%) had a confirmed disability and received additional support.
- In 2004, DET employed approximately 89,000 full time equivalent staff, 96% of whom work in schools and TAFE colleges.
- In 2004, TAFE NSW provided training to over 9% of the State population aged between 15 and 64 across 10 TAFE Institutes, covering 137 campuses.

DET’s 2,244 schools and 137 TAFE campuses are clearly producing some very impressive results. DET’s size also provides opportunities for economies of scale and, compared with every other state and territory in Australia, NSW is by far the lowest costing education bureaucracy in the country (NSW spends on average $373 per student on administration costs while Queensland is the next lowest at $434 per student). In addition, NSW’s total expenditure per student is $10,139 per student in 2002/03, well above the Australian average of $9,605 per student for the same year.

DET’s size and demand for efficiencies sometimes leads to a one-size-fits-all approach to educational provision. There is a belief that DET’s size results in an administratively driven organisation that imposes decisions, and solutions, from the top down. According to one Sydney high school principal, the existing
culture obstructs any sensible, rapid response to local needs. While the ‘tri-level reform’ agenda currently being implemented across the Office of Schools and regions is attempting to address this issue on both a cultural and operational level, there remain structural, policy and procedural obstacles to the full realisation of a system which better supports local solutions to local needs and expectations.

IMPERATIVES FOR CHANGE

The International Context

NSW education does not see itself in isolation from educational developments in other parts of Australia and the world. Indeed there is broad acceptance that the performance of public education and training in this State must be measured not only against nationally agreed standards but also by our performance against our international peers.

By many measures our performance is excellent. With the most rigorous and comprehensive state-wide external testing regime in the country, students are tested in Years 3, 5, 7 and 8 for literacy and numeracy. In addition, students sit examinations for the School Certificate in Year 10 and the HSC in Year 12. These tests point to impressive learning outcomes achieved by the students of this State:

- NSW is first or second in a number of Years 3 and 5 national reading and writing benchmarks.
- NSW 15-year-old students rank amongst the best in the world in literacy, according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In the 2003 PISA study of 41 countries around the world, students in NSW, as a group, performed better in reading literacy than students in countries such as Sweden, Netherlands, Hong Kong, Norway, Japan, France, United States, Germany and Italy. Only students in Finland did better than NSW in reading literacy and Finland was the only country to do better than NSW across all four areas tested: mathematical literacy, reading literacy, scientific literacy, and problem solving. In reading literacy, no state or territory in Australia significantly outperformed NSW students. Two-thirds of the NSW students tested were selected at random from NSW public schools.
- The 2002/03 Trends in Mathematical and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted in 46 countries also show NSW students performing extremely well in science. Only Singaporean students performed significantly better than NSW students in science in Year 8 and only Singapore and Chinese Taipei performed significantly better than NSW in science in Year 4. NSW students also performed well in maths, with students from only five countries performing significantly better than Year 8 students.

Results such as these are reason for celebration but not for complacency. In an endeavour to not only maintain but to improve on this position, DET must open itself to close scrutiny in all aspects of its operations. NSW needs to continually raise the bar as our international counterparts continually raise theirs. The truism that maintaining the status quo in a world of continuous change and progress has the effect of going backwards relative to others, is never more pertinent than in the context of education.

The Changing Environment

Public education and training in NSW, as in other states and territories, operates in a complex two-tier environment. Through its funding and reporting arrangements with the states, the Commonwealth government is increasingly impacting on the nature of education provision across the nation. This national agenda intensifies the resourcing and policy complexity of the environment in which the State system operates.

Rapid and continuous change is the defining circumstance for these times. Its pace, impact and global reach pose great challenges for the relevance and appropriateness of organisational structures, curriculum and services delivery, and the quality of teaching and learning.

At the same time, public education and training now operates in a highly competitive marketplace where choice is readily enabled through Commonwealth funding policies and the greater command, by individual families, of the discretionary wealth that can be applied to that choice.

This is a society in which education and training is seen by many as a commodity, a positional good, and a mechanism for social and economic leverage. It is also subject to inevitable, desirable, and welcome
demands by parents, carers, industry and the broader community for greater participation in decision-making and in the process of learning itself. A system which takes account of these demands along with greater community scrutiny of educational delivery, is a system which is better able to satisfy community expectations of highest quality and responsiveness to customer needs.

A Learning Organisation

The organisation that listens, learns continuously and acts on that learning is a healthy organisation. It is even healthier if it continuously adapts to changing contexts and builds its capacity to achieve better outcomes for students.

The Futures consultation is a clear demonstration of a learning organisation in intent and in practice. We have learnt from respondents that there is room for improvement in many areas. For example, the transition points into and through learning are identified as major areas for action. Like all systems and despite the considerable efforts of government, the system, principals and teachers, we have to continue to work on achieving the seamless, continuum of learning for students as they progress through school, TAFE and/or university.

The principle of lifelong learning is yet to be fully achieved. The imperative to address these issues creatively and to make them a reality drives the commitment to review our work through the Futures process.

Education and the Economy

In the State which constitutes the largest and most powerful driver of the national economy and which is the hub of Australia’s Asia-Pacific and world economic engagement, the link between a robust and vital public education and training system and economic strength, is a crucial consideration for our State Government.

On an individual level, the relationship between education and income is almost linear. The OECD states that the more skilled the worker, the wealthier they will be (2003: 13). On a broader level, greater labour mobility, lower unemployment and greater job satisfaction are also directly attributable to education. For societies, more education leads to better health, lower crime, increased social engagement and greater gross domestic product.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of developing the human and intellectual capital of a nation. A recent Canadian study has shown that if you measure actual skills rather than educational qualifications, human capital becomes a strong predictor of economic growth. (Economist 2004) Using the Adult Literacy Survey, a team of researchers at the University of Ottawa has identified a clear and significant association between investments in human capital … and a country’s subsequent growth and labour productivity. Specifically, a rise of 1% in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5% relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per head. (Economist, 2004)

The link between learning performance and economic performance establishes an undeniable rationale for the types of changes and progressive improvements to the system that will continue to deliver growth in learning performance for all students whether in school, TAFE or both.

Skilling in a Changing Society

In the world of work, Australia is experiencing change at a rate and level of complexity quite different from that experienced in the past due to such factors as:

- increasing impacts from globalisation
- new and emerging industries
- new ways of doing business
- new business skills needs
- new and emerging technologies,
- demographic shifts, such as the ageing population and the growing wealth divide.
Globalisation is forcing new ways of organising … work. Enterprises are increasingly integrating their systems, particularly in aligning training strategy with overall business strategy to improve their bottom line. (ANTA, 2004: 3)

In this context, skills shortages are a critical issue, and the decline in traditional skills is affecting many sectors in the economy, particularly the resourcing sector. A recent Commonwealth study into the New Apprenticeships scheme has found that while growth in the scheme has been impressive, traditional trades’ share of commencements has fallen from 25% in 1996 to around 13% in 2003 (DEST, 2004: 4). This decline in traditional skills is affecting many sectors in the economy, particularly the resourcing sector. Resources projects worth billions of dollars are now in jeopardy because of an acute skilled labour shortage (BRW, 2005).

The causes of the situation are complex. It has been said that parents are discouraging their children from entering the trades and that many people now believe that only a university education will provide the right foundation for successful careers and futures. There is also a view that industry may not have played a sufficiently active role in employing apprentices. The issue is, however, not so much identifying the causes as finding the ways they should be addressed.

During the course of the Futures project, the State Government launched its TradeStart@TAFENSW initiative which is designed to address a number of the issues around apprenticeships. However, industry, Government and TAFE will need to continue to work together to develop a range of strategies which will address the issue of skills shortages.

To provide skilled workers for Australia’s traditional, new and emerging industries, TAFE NSW will need a highly responsive and flexible approach. This will enable TAFE to maintain its viability while satisfying stakeholder requirements. If TAFE is to continue training students with industry standard facilities, equipment and resources, significant decisions about priorities, investment and renewal will need to be made. TAFE will need to enhance its industry partnerships. It will also need to build its capacity to earn commercial revenue and balance its priorities to meet the diverse needs of individuals, industry and communities.

The Futures Project Consultation Results

The consultation’s dominant message is that NSW education and training is a great system that can do better. To do this it must adopt a more flexible, student centred and responsive approach to the resourcing and management of schools and TAFE and of the system as a whole.

The DET operates in a highly competitive education market-place which is offering myriad services against which DET’s centralised services are not always competing effectively. Much potential has been shown in the steps taken to bring services closer to the locus of learning through the establishment of regions. However, further evolution of this model was suggested through the consultation in the desire for more localised support and greater discretion over resources to meet local needs.

The consultation’s responses can be clustered into four main themes:

- enhanced learning for students
- strengthening educational leadership
- building a more responsive and innovative system, and
- maintaining TAFE’s position as the leader in vocational education.

These four themes are detailed in chapters two to five below.

CONCLUSION

There are many things that the public education and training system of NSW currently does very well. The dedicated support staff, teachers, leaders and managers in DET’s employ are making this happen in a large and complex organisation.
DET’s falling market share in schools suggests, however, that it is not meeting the requirements of parents who choose to send their children to other schools. DET must meet the needs of an increasingly competitive education market-place if it is to be the choice for a growing majority of parents and students in this State.

The challenge for a large and inclusive education and training system is that it must raise expectations and improve the learning performance of its students across all cohorts and groups. It must also narrow the gap between its top performers and its lower performers. The National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington, defines a successful education system as one in which the top tenth of the students compare favourably to the top tenth in any nation in the world, and the bottom tenth is very close to the top tenth (Tucker and Codding, 2000). The future of NSW public education and training should be measured in these terms for the benefits such performance will bring to individuals as well as to the society as a whole.

Raising expectations, improving learning outcomes and narrowing the performance gap are difficult but attainable goals. This consultation has recorded the voices of a community striving for more from their public education system. This community appreciates the importance of a quality education and DET’s crucial role in providing it. At a broad level, the NSW community wants a well supported, accountable organisation which gets things done quickly and effectively at a local level as well as responds to its changing environment and innovates to meet future needs. NSW public education and training has a proud history of adaptation and innovation and must continue its tradition of improving its performance for the benefit of NSW and the individual children and young people and adults of this great State.

References


Notes

1 Note on national literacy and numeracy benchmarks: 2001 is the latest national data that is published. 2002 and 2003 data will be published shortly as will all Year 7 data for 2001, 2002 and 2003