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EQUALITY OR EQUITY? : EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FUTURES

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The Hon. John Dawkins (then) Minister for Employment, Education and Training, launched *the* Aboriginal Education Policy at a grand event in the Committee Room at Parliament House on 26th October 1989. The Prime Minister blessed the occasion with his presence and a short speech. Three of the former Chairs of the the National Aboriginal Education Committee were there, as were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educationists from most Australian states. Only New South Wales, which decided to boycott the launch, wasn't officially represented.

There are two reasons for calling the policy that the Minister launched *the* Aboriginal Education Policy. Firstly, because it is the first policy formally endorsed by any National government; and secondly, because it responds to the call made in the 1988 Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, for a concerted national effort -

to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes at all stages of education.
(National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989: 1.2.6 - Draft).

The purpose of the Policy then is to initiate and set into operation procedures for achieving the goals of the policy as agreed between the Commonwealth and State governments.

It is not the only Aboriginal Education Policy. Most State education systems have established at least Aboriginal Education procedures which have, in some instances, been formulated as Departmental policies. These procedures have been developed more or less in consultation with Aboriginal Education Advisory (Consultative) Groups. Many of the State consultative groups have, in their turn, drawn up their own policy statements and have worked to have them accepted and implemented in their own State

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systems. Finally, it is not the ultimate Aboriginal Education Policy. It will need much refining and re-drafting over time to make it produce the forms of education and of educational results that Aboriginal and Islander people may require in an ever-changing Australian society.

So, what is it that this latest Aboriginal Education Policy wants to do and how does it propose to do it?

What it wants to do is, in the words of the Policy Draft (1989:2.2.1), 'to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education'. It has therefore taken up the call in the Task Force's Report and set it as the Policy's main aim.

In another formulation, the purpose of the policy is set out under four points thus,

- to ensure Aboriginal involvement in educational decision making;
- to provide equality of access for Aboriginal people to education services;
- to raise the rates of Aboriginal participation in education to those for all Australians;
- to achieve equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal people.

(National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, summary. 1989: 1).

It should be noted that in these two statements of purpose the words 'equity', 'equitable' and 'equality' are used as though they share a common meaning to do with being equal. They don't, of course. 'Equity' and 'equitable' refer to being fair, impartial, even handed. So, when the policy says it wants to 'achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians', it isn't saying it wants equality of access, participation and outcomes. It is only saying it wants Aborigines to get their fair share of what other Australians get. Which begs the question, of course - Who decides what is a 'fair share' of access, participation and outcomes in all levels of education? The second formulation makes the distinction clearer. 'Equity' is to mean equality of access to education services; participation rates raised to equal that of other Australians; but 'equitable and appropriate' outcomes only.

The distinctions of meaning are even more clearly defined in the long-term goals set out in the Policy Draft (2.2.2.:1-21). The heading 'equality of access to educational services' reveals that Aboriginal children are to have access to pre-school services *comparable* to other Australian children; they are to have local access to primary and secondary schooling; and they are to have *equitable* access to post-compulsory secondary, to TAFE and to higher education. This does not add up to equality - 'comparable' and 'equitable' don't mean 'equal'.

Next, the heading 'equity of educational participation' - remember, 'equity' does not mean 'equality' - seeks that Aboriginal children should stay at pre-school for as long as other Australian children their age, that all Aboriginal children should participate in compulsory schooling, and that their rates of participation in further secondary and higher education should be *commensurate* with other Australians. No one of these is really saying anything about either equity or equality of participation.

Finally, there is 'equitable and appropriate educational outcomes'. There are nine long-term goals listed here. None of them proposes 'equitable' outcomes. Six of them propose 'appropriate' outcomes in certain specific educational areas (adult literacy, community development, Aboriginal studies, educational skilling) and only two identify outcomes from schooling, and further and higher education that require equality ('the same rates') as for all other Australians.

So, what is it really that this latest Aboriginal Education Policy wants to do? It certainly proposes a coordinated national effort to raise levels of Aboriginal access to and participation in education, and it seeks a raising of the standards of educational outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. Does it seek full educational equality for them, though? The policy statement may seem to be saying yes, it does, but it isn't, in fact, saying that at all.

Look at what the Policy Draft calls its Intermediate Priorities (1989:3.3). They are, firstly, 'to address the major inequities in educational access and participation' by building on what has already been achieved state by state, making sure that the incremental strategies 'are realistic and achievable within the constraints of available resources'. The immediate aim, as far as access and participation is concerned, is to achieve equity for Aboriginal and Islander children of pre-school

and compulsory schooling age. Three strategies will be used to achieve this - increased parental involvement, provision of local education facilities and distance education services, and improvement in the quality and sensitivity of teaching. In this context, what is 'equity'? It is to bring the level of Aboriginal participation towards the national rate. Specifically that means -

from less than 50% to over 90% pre-schooling education of at least one year;
from 85% to close to 100% participation in compulsory primary and secondary schooling.

(Policy Draft 1989:3.3.4).

In addition to raising attendance and retention rates, the Policy's aim is to improve the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students, so education providers will be expected to develop performance indicators for their own schools. Finally, the retention rates to Year 12 need to be raised from 22% to around 58%, and efforts will have to be made to increase Aboriginal participation in award courses at TAFE and across a wider range of higher education courses.

On the face of it, then, what the Policy proposes seems fairly straight forward and achievable, at least as far as participation and access are concerned. Put planning and money into making sure that educational services are locally available, work on the parents to see that their children use the services on a regular basis and look for a better skilled and culturally sensitive approach in teaching. But at this point the Policy draft grows silent. The separate State, religious and private schools are the education providers. When it comes to the 'how' of implementing the policy, 'the education providers in the States and Territories are responsible for the delivery of education services and the Commonwealth will respect the autonomy of their operations' (Policy Draft 1989:4.1.1). From there on the Policy concerns itself only with the agreed arrangements for policy implementation. This involves the States and other education providers drawing up their own strategic plans, without unilaterally varying the goals and objectives of the Policy; agreements being reached on funding; and programs of monitoring and reporting being established. The Policy implementation arrangements are detailed, requiring the drawing up and review, on an annual basis, of triennial strategic plans in consultation between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories.

Aboriginal participation is to be ensured at all levels of this planning, including in the development of forward triennial operational plans. The operational plans are to encompass:

- Aboriginal parent and/or student, and community involvement;
- employment of Aboriginals in teaching and other professional and para-professional positions;
- professional development of educational personnel, including specific programs to sensitise non-Aboriginal teachers and administrators;
- development of student support services;
- curriculum development;
- evaluation procedures; and
- particular matters identified as State or Territory priorities.

(Policy Draft 1989:4.1.6).

Essentially these comprise the core element in the operational plan and they thus pinpoint what the Aboriginal Education Policy formulators believe to be the main things that have to be done for Aboriginal and Islander people to win equity with other Australians at all levels of education. In a sense, it can be said that they identify those areas of education which have not adequately met the particular needs of Aboriginal people in the past. Let me spell them out a little more fully.

The failure of schools to involve Aboriginal communities, parents and students in their educational activities has long been blamed for student absenteeism and for low participation rates. One of the major means for involving Aboriginal people in their local schools is to Aboriginalise the schools, in that Aboriginal personnel be employed in them in positions of status and Aboriginal voices be heard and listened to on school boards and committees.

Both personal and structural attitudes in schools towards Aboriginal people, and especially to students, have been another major cause of Aboriginal resistance to schooling. Since the early 1970s there have been calls for inclusion of Aboriginal Studies courses for all teachers, both pre-service and in-service.

Given the social demands made on Aboriginal people because of their culturally based commitments, many of them have been unable to leave their home communities to pursue higher levels of education. On site access to all levels of education, and to educational facilities is the only way to ensure for many Aboriginal people, equity in educational access and participation.

Poverty, inadequate facilities in the home, culturally preferred behaviour - a whole range of social factors have been identified as entering into and interfering with the process of education of Aboriginal people. To counter these, schools, education systems and the Commonwealth have developed or financed support services and programs like supplementary funding for student travel, meals, clothing, equipment, fees, after school study and so on.

Probably nothing is more problematic, or more disputed in education today than the curriculum. We debate the concept of a national core curriculum. We contest each other's right of access to the content of a curriculum. We demand a curriculum that is identifiably Australian. We want the curriculum to focus on the developmental needs of the Australian economy. We seek a curriculum that students individually can relate to because they can see themselves included in it. Certainly Aboriginal educators have been outspoken in condemning the curriculum generally available to Aboriginal students, mainly because it lacks relevance for them. The problem of developing a curriculum that is relevant for Aboriginal students but gives them equitable outcomes with other Australian students is yet to be resolved.

Along with curriculum development goes the development of appropriate pedagogies to match Aboriginal-preferred learning modes. In the light of the belief that Aboriginal students may prefer ways of learning that are not generally encouraged in present-day teaching, it may be that teachers adapting their pedagogies to suit the needs of their Aboriginal students may also need to develop new evaluation and assessment techniques.

As far as the Policy Draft is concerned these are the problem areas in Aboriginal education. They are the core issues to be encompassed in the operational plan prepared by each State and Territory. The question is, though, are they the same issues identified by Aboriginal and other educators and researchers working in the field of Aboriginal education?

Four documents may help us answer this. In 1982, the Australian Government Publishing Service published a summary version of a four volume review of research, developments and related policies in the education of Aborigines prepared by Professor Betty Watts. It covered the ten year period after the historic referendum of 1967. In 1985, the National Aboriginal education Committee finalised and published its statement of philosophy, aims and policy guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Although the Committee no longer exists, its statement remains a significant formulation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy. Also in 1985, the long-awaited report of the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education appeared. It received 184 written submissions and heard 201 witnesses at sittings held all round Australia. Most recently, an Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force was set up by the Department of Employment, Education and Training to pull together recommendations and proposals on Aboriginal education from a number of official sources. Its report appeared in 1988.

One other document is also worth noting. In 1987 the Curriculum Development Centre, as part of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Pedagogy Project, commissioned the consultancy firm, Australian Info International, to produce a review of research and practice in Aboriginal education covering the decade since the publication of Watt's review to 1978. Their report was delivered to the Curriculum Development Centre in 1988 but remains unpublished. The Curriculum Development Centre and its Pedagogy Project no longer exist.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee's *Philosophy, Aims and Policy Guidelines* document was published when Mr Paul Hughes was Chairman of the Committee. He was Chairman, too, of the Task Force that prepared the 1988 Report on Aboriginal education policy for the Department of Employment, Education and Training. It is not surprising then that there are close similarities in the presentation of aims in both papers, even if the actual wording of them may vary. In the former document, the aims as stated are:

- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education be a process that builds on our cultural heritage and world view;
- that educational programs be developed using Aboriginal learning styles accompanied by an appropriate pedagogy;

- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education lead to personal development and the acquisition of the skills and learning needed for Australia today;
- that Australia as a whole becomes aware of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and history;
- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies be the core of further cross-cultural studies for a multicultural Australia;
- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be given the responsibility for planning and implementing policies on Aboriginal education;
- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be trained for and employed in education service delivery.

(National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985:5).

These aims and objectives are then applied to particular educational issues under the headings of community education, curriculum, early childhood education, primary/secondary education, bicultural/bilingual education, tertiary education (including teacher education, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, research and administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The Aboriginal Education Task Force Report gives these as its aims and objectives:

- to achieve equity in the provision of education to all Aboriginal children, young people and adults by the year 2000;
- to assist Aboriginal parents and communities to be fully involved in the planning and provision of education for themselves and their children;
- to achieve parity in participation rates by Aboriginal people with those of other Australians in all stages of education;
- to achieve positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal people in schooling and tertiary education;
- to improve the provision of education services across the nation at the local level.

(Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988:16-17).

The detailed application of these aims and objectives to particular educational issues is spelled out in a series of 59 recommendations, some of them rather repetitive, but which identify the same issues as those in the National Aboriginal Education Committee's *Philosophy, Aims and Policy Guidelines*.

For the sake of clarity, let me abstract from each of these documents in turn, the key aims and objectives to be achieved.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee wants:

- * a curriculum that is based on Aboriginal and Islander cultural heritage and world view, and that uses a pedagogy that accepts culturally preferred styles of learning;
- * an educational outcome that seeks the student's development as an Aboriginal person but also provides the skills and knowledge needed to live in modern day Australia;
- * the inclusion of Aboriginal and Islander studies in the education of all Australians with the overall aim of developing skills in cross-cultural education;
- * the preparation of Aboriginal and Islander people to take over responsibility for planning and implementing policies in Aboriginal and Islander education, including employment in the delivery of educational services.

The Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force wants all of these too, but in 1988, the educational discourse has changed:

- ° equity in educational provision
- ° parity in participation rates
- ° positive educational outcomes
- ° improved provision of educational services
- ° involvement of Aboriginal parents and communities in the planning and provision of education.

It is easy to see how each of these translates into the final National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy's four main purposes - Aboriginal involvement, equity of access, raised participation and equitable and appropriate outcomes.

In presenting its report *Aboriginal Education*, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education noted that it had called as witnesses representatives of 57 organisations and 22 private citizens who had made submissions to it. Another 116 people and organisations made submissions to the Committee, but did not appear as witnesses. Nearly every organisation and many people, therefore, who had responsibility for, or an interest or involvement in, Aboriginal and Islander education were heard by the Committee. It was in a good position, then, to report on the current status, the history of and the priority issues in Aboriginal and Islander education. It prefaces its report with a summary of its findings and with 106 recommendations that flow from them. No priority is indicated in the listing of any of the recommendations. They are presented as a series of headings indicating the aspects of Aboriginal and Islander education towards which the Committee's attention was directed during its enquiry.

Before attempting an analysis of these recommendations, it is important to note that whereas the documents we have so far examined have represented in the main Aboriginal and Islander developed viewpoints, the information and opinions presented to the Select Committee came mainly from non-Aboriginal bureaucrats, academics and teachers. Aboriginal and Islander viewpoints were presented very strongly to the Committee and were listened to. The recommendations show that. But other voices were also being listened to and the recommendations show that as well. For example, the very first recommendation reflects the bureaucratic voice. It calls on a number of national statutory bodies to consult with the National Aboriginal Education Committee to 'develop a coordinated approach to the collection of statistics in Aboriginal education with a view to improving the database for decision-making' (Australian House of Representatives Select Committee, 1985:1).

Here, then, are the major findings of the Select Committee:

- although on the evidence presented to it, Aboriginal educational attainments remained significantly low, there is a need for more detailed information through the gathering of statistics and through research;
- Aboriginal people should be involved in establishing the aims and objectives of Aboriginal educational policies and programs, with local Aboriginal communities having a substantial role in specifying their particular needs;

- because there are so many organisations and agencies involved in policy development, funding and service delivery in Aboriginal education, there is a need to significantly improve the coordination of policy development and funding with the Commonwealth Government assuming a major role;
- the role of the National Aboriginal Education Committee and of the State and Territory Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups should be expanded and they should be adequately supported to ensure that they are able to reflect in their recommendations the views of the separate Aboriginal communities;
- early childhood and pre-school education programs for Aboriginal children should be expanded so that all Aboriginal children can have access to them and so that they can provide for the particular needs and values of the children;
- there is a particular need at primary school level for appropriate curricula which stress the development of literacy and numeracy, for tutorial assistance to ensure the curricula are successful, for schooling which Aboriginal students are comfortable in and that promotes their identity as Aborigines;
- (bilingual/bicultural education programs should be supported, expanded and made available to those communities which request them);
- in secondary schooling the main concerns are the low rates of participation and success for Aboriginal students and the problems of access to secondary education facilities for students in remote communities; (a number of measures were recommended to encourage student retention and participation);
- support for Aboriginal initiatives in establishing independent Aboriginal schools;
- post-schooling programs for Aboriginal people to help achieve self-management and self-sufficiency;
- introduction of Aboriginal Studies units into schools and other educational institutions to benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students;
- as many Aboriginal teachers as possible to be trained to work in Australian schools and a career structure for

Aboriginal teaching assistants and educational support staff be developed;

- appropriately trained and committed teachers to be appointed to schools with significant Aboriginal enrolment.

There is no need to point out that in the main, the Select Committee has pinpointed the very same areas of education for concern as those identified in all three previous documents that I have cited. Certainly, there is a clear call for Aboriginal involvement, equity of access, raised participation and equitable and appropriate outcomes, and the separate areas the report focuses on cover the same ground as those core elements of the operational plan set out in the draft Aboriginal Education Policy document.

It seems very evident, then, from this analysis of three documents significant to the formulation over the last decade of Aboriginal and Islander Education policy, that there is considerable agreement on the focus areas and strategies to be pursued. In her exhaustive study of research, development and policy formulation in the decade 1968-78, Professor Watts, whilst also identifying these focus areas and strategies, has a few caveats to note.

She picks up early in her report some trends in general Australian education at that time and makes the point that -

those who plan specifically for Aboriginal schools are inevitably influenced in their thinking by considerations which prevail in the educational thought of the day.

(Watts, 1982:11).

The trends she identified were:

- diversity in curriculum and in schools
- equality of opportunity
- devolution of decision making to regions, schools and teachers
- responsiveness to societal changes
- new roles for teachers
- Federal funding of education.

These same trends, which she noted as having potential advantages in education for Aborigines provided special steps were taken to apply them to Aboriginal needs, gain visible expression in the policy documents we have analysed. But these were educational trends from a previous decade. What of current educational trends towards, for instance, a core national curriculum; towards more centralised curriculum development; towards skilling the workforce; towards user-pays policies in education; towards giving school communities some measures of financial autonomy. Writing in 1988, Eric Willmot, then Chief Education Officer of the ACT Schools Authority, referred to present day educationists harking back to 'unrealistic dreams of the early 1970s' and emphasises the major changes that have taken place through the 1980s in Australia:

The economic state of the country has changed, social aims have changed, educational expectations have changed.

(Willmot, 1989:2).

The consequences of these changes have been:

- more centralised approaches towards unity in curriculum and in schooling provision;
- equity rather than equality in access, in services and in outcomes;
- devolution of financial responsibility to schools and school boards but a lessening of local educational decision-making;
- responsiveness to economic rather than to societal changes;
- new managerial rather than educational roles for teachers;
- more restrictive control over education by the Federal government through its control over educational funding.

It remains to be seen how these changes may impact on the four basic aims of the Aboriginal Education Policy. That they will impact is certain, just as developing trends in the 90s will, and policy in Aboriginal education will need to be flexible enough to accommodate these trends.

There are other caveats in Watts' report. On the question of developing appropriate curriculum for Aboriginal children she warns that -

Where education authorities are particularly concerned about the generally low academic achievements in many Aboriginal groups, there exists the danger that there will develop an unproductive emphasis on the basic subjects and a narrowing of the curriculum for Aboriginal children.

(Watts, 1982:14)

On the provision of diversity in schooling, she warns that Aboriginal people looking at the option of alternative Aboriginal schooling

may need special opportunity to examine and think through the implications...[and] to achieve a clear picture of the probable consequences of enrolment in a regular school versus enrolment in an alternative type of school.

(Watts, 1982:12)

Finally, on the proposals to devolve autonomy on schools and teachers, she sees this benefitting Aboriginal students

only if school staff have a special knowledge of their circumstances, qualities and needs accompanied by a wide range of expertise in teaching/learning strategies that are educationally and culturally relevant to these students.

(Watts, 1982:13)

Although formulated in the light of Aboriginal educational experience in the 1960s and 70s, Watts' caveats remain relevant. In general, for the present policy objectives to be achieved, a massive program needs to be mounted to train teachers, both pre-service and in-service, in cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural skills for Aboriginal education. Much more professional skill and planning must go into curriculum development to ensure that Aboriginal students get from their schooling the outcomes Aboriginal communities have specified. Both the education systems themselves and teachers must undertake a dramatic re-thinking of their roles in educational decision-making and in the provision of educational services, if Aboriginal communities and parents are to have the involvement in their own and their children's education that policy envisages. A disproportionate amount of educational funding will have to go into ensuring Aboriginal people access to all levels of education and to

quality of facilities and services that match those available to other Australians. This will involve the Federal, State and Territory governments in public awareness programs that effectively justify the expenditure. Aboriginal people in general are going to have to make great sacrifices of their own personal time, energy and family commitments in order to undertake the responsibilities thrust on them by the Aboriginal Education Policy, lest its failure be blamed on their personal indifference and intransigence.

Evidently the publication by the Federal Government of its National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy is not about to bring an instantaneous and dramatic improvement in Aboriginal education. Its aims and objectives have been articulated in various presentations throughout the 1970s and 80s. Yet the report prepared for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Pedagogy Project by the consultancy firm Australian InFo International could say in 1988 -

Nowhere, as yet, is there evidence of any educational system or school program dramatically altering the evidence of failure of systems and schools to meet the educational needs of their Aboriginal and Islander students (1988:6).

This is not to say that there wasn't evidence that some of the systems and school-based innovations and experiments had brought some improvements. In reviewing some 300 key documents relating to Aboriginal and Islander education since 1978, the Pedagogy Project report found, though, that useful innovations, such as the introduction of Aboriginal and Islander para-professionals into the school, were often frustrated by the inability of the school and its professional staff to identify their purpose and encourage their use in the school:

- How often have Aboriginal and Islander teaching assistants and others been assigned the role of tea-makers, sick room attendants, messengers and class minders in their schools?
- How much effort have the systems and the schools put into countering adverse criticism of financial support schemes set in place for Aboriginal and Islander students?
- What significance has been placed on Aboriginal and Islander studies in the curriculum for all students?

- How many teachers, either in in-service or pre-service education, have been given the opportunity to develop cultural sensitivity towards, and to develop cross-cultural communication and interaction skills in Aboriginal and Islander education?
- What strategies, if any, have systems and schools devised to make it possible for Aboriginal and Islander people to enter into real dialogue with their local schools and to join in the vital decision making process relating to their children's education?

The newly proclaimed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy represents, as it says (Summary, 1989:1)

a concerted effort on the part of the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal people.

These are modest aims, carefully explained in terms of 'equity', 'equitable', 'comparable', but rarely 'equal'. Yet why not equal? The proposal is for a concerted effort. The evidence indicates that anything less than a massive, concerted and prolonged effort involving revolutionary change in educational thinking, in teacher performance and in educational provision, will fail to produce the sort of educational equality with other Australians that Aboriginal and Islander people seek. 'Equal' doesn't mean the same. Aboriginal and Islander people have made it very clear that they do not necessarily seek the same outcomes from education as do, say, the upper middle class white Anglo-Australians in Toorak or Potts Point - though they may. They do want from education, though, equal access to levels of quality schooling that will skill them equally with other Australians to take their place as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians, at any level of and in any socio-economic environment in Australian society. If the policy achieves anything less than this for Aboriginal and Islander people and in a minimum of time, then it will be yet another failure to be chalked up against all Australian education providers and the governments that support them.

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