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Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations

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The Sir Robert Menzies Oration 2008

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Wurinjuri people and pay my respects to their elders and ancestors.

I would like to acknowledge the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, members of council, academic staff, graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

We're here this evening to affirm the importance of education to our nation and our lives and to celebrate the achievements of 16 talented Australians who have just come up to the stage to receive their doctoral certificates. It's the highest honour this esteemed university can give.

The people who have accompanied these graduates – proud grandparents, parents, partners, children and friends – know just what the award of these degrees represents.

It's an acknowledgement of outstanding intelligence.

But of something more as well.

Character and sacrifice.

Some people squander their talents. But these graduates most certainly have not.

Getting to this point has taken them decades of study. Years of living on modest scholarships. Perhaps putting off buying a home and starting a family. Turning their backs on more lucrative fields like the commercial law, surgery or the stock market – all while friends have attained high salaries and built glittering careers.

They did it because they possess a passion for knowledge. About the structure of our universe. About the nature of diseases. About how we can combat climate change and adjust to drought. About how we can overcome the alienation of our cities and the injustices of our society. And about how music and the visual arts can be used to enrich our lives.

Their passion for knowledge is for its own sake and for the betterment of society.

And their passion for knowledge has been met by a passion for teaching and research in this university.

Surely there is nothing more dynamic than an environment dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge that combines a person desperate to learn with teachers and mentors driven to help.

Education of this sort changes individual lives and has the capacity to change the life of a nation.

The man we're also honouring tonight, Sir Robert Menzies, demonstrated he understood the power of education as a force for good, a force for equity and a force for change when he said in one of his 1942 radio addresses:

'In the new world we must seek to develop all the intelligence and strength and character in every child. Each one of them must have his chance. We must spend much more on education; we must show that discipline is not the enemy of freedom but its best friend; we must get to know that at least as much genius is to be found and nurtured in Collingwood and Bankstown as in Toorak or Bellevue Hill.'

Menzies was certainly no revolutionary when it came to education. But during his long prime ministership tertiary enrolments more than tripled from a low base. His Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme provided opportunities to tens of thousands of young Australians based on the idea of merit. Salaries for academics increased to reflect their respected status. And the structures he established through the Australian Universities Commission and the Martin Committee lasted in their essential forms until the late 1980s.

Menzies was Prime Minister in a different era, when education was universally associated with progress. When support for universities provoked bipartisan consensus. A time well before intellectualism came to be viewed in some quarters with suspicion. Before 'elitism' became an insult. Before eloquence was met with mistrust.

But thankfully there are signs all around us that – to pinch a slogan – change is coming, and that the era of mistrust of intellect and of intellectuals is coming to an end.

OBAMA – THE TRIUMPH OF EDUCATION

Just yesterday we saw more evidence of this. Something happened which just a few years ago seemed not just improbable but impossible: the election of an African-American as President of the United States.

The election of Barack Obama is an extraordinary story about the triumph of tolerance over prejudice.

But it's about more than that. It's a redemptive story about the power of education to overcome disadvantage.

We know of Obama's erudition and eloquence.

But how did an African-American child of a sometimes penniless single mother, who knew his father for only a month, and who was brought up largely by his grandparents, make it to the White House?

Not surprisingly, the answer is education.

Obama tells us in his wonderful story of his childhood and early adulthood, *Dreams from my father*, how his mother decided early on that his chances in life would depend on education. Whilst living in Djakarta in Indonesia, for instance, she took a job in the US Embassy so she could afford to enrol him in a correspondence course to improve his chances of getting into a good secondary school. Obama writes:

'Five days a week, she came into my room at four in the morning, force-fed me breakfast, and proceeded to teach me English lessons for three hours before I left for school and she went to work. I offered stiff resistance to this regimen, but in response to every strategy I concocted, whether unconvincing or indisputably true, she would patently repeat her most powerful defense: "This is no picnic for me either, buster."'

His mother understood that as a member of a minority he needed the edge that only education could provide. And she knew that overcoming that disadvantage took hard work.

Fearing her son wouldn't get the right education in Indonesia, Obama's mother sent him to live with his grandparents in Hawaii, who enrolled him in an elite US preparatory school. This led on to college in Los Angeles, Columbia University and eventually Harvard, where he became the first ever African-American President of the Harvard Law Review.

Like his oratory, Obama's educational experience provides hope that we can create a better and fairer society.

And his path isn't as unusual as we may think. Many people from quite humble backgrounds have achieved amazing things in Australia because they received a good education. One thinks of our Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd.

Education changes lives – in my own family and my own life I have seen its power.

My father was the second youngest son of a coal mining family in South Wales, in the village of Cwmgrach. He was one of seven brothers and sisters. Only the youngest child had the opportunity to complete a high school education, let alone go on to further study. He became an engineer. My father through adult study became a nurse. His brothers and sisters became miners or married miners. They lived happy lives but as this family case study shows, the opportunity of education changes lives.

It changed mine with the opportunity to go to university flowing from Gough Whitlam's opening up of our university system.

But more than 60 years after Robert Menzies' war time address on education and after so much change, an uncomfortable truth still confronts us – we know that the children of the Collingwood high rise public housing flats still don't have the same educational opportunities as the children of Toorak. More than 60 years after Robert Menzies laid out the challenge of educational equity, the challenge is unmet.

Consider this: last month the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth reported that seven percent of Australian children were growing up in households owning fewer than eleven books. For Indigenous children the figure is 19 percent. Ask yourself: how can we nourish hungry minds in the absence of things to read?

Consider also the disturbing fact that 30 percent fewer Indigenous young people attain a Year 12 qualification than other young Australians. It's not because they're any less intelligent; it's because our society has neglected their learning needs. And it's a scandal that that has been allowed to go on for so long.

It's not surprising given figures like these to learn that a child from a low socio-economic status family today has less than half the likelihood of going to university than a child from a high socio-economic status background. Indeed, more than a quarter of young people from poorer families receive no post compulsory education of any kind.

In Robert Menzies' time, our nation could have said to itself that leaving school early wasn't so bad because a lifetime of work opportunities, including very secure jobs, were available for the unskilled.

But our world has changed and post-compulsory education is so much more important now. And not just more important. Absolutely crucial!

Those without qualifications have the weakest attachment to the labour market. And as the recession of the 1990s demonstrated, when unemployment increases, it's the uneducated that are most likely to lose their jobs and become long-term unemployed.

Without human capital behind them, young people's prospects today are very poor indeed.

Rupert Murdoch was right when, in his first Boyer Lecture earlier this week, he call this a form of injustice to individuals and a future burden to our society that absolutely must be addressed.

Ensuring that every Australian, no matter how wealthy or poor, has a fair chance of joining the graduates who trod this stage this evening is one of the most important challenges for Australian universities and the Australian Government.

Our reputation as an egalitarian nation and our future prosperity rests on the outcome.

WE NEED A NEW REFORM AGENDA FOR NEW TIMES

We've met these sorts of challenges before.

Thanks to the reforms initiated by Education Minister John Dawkins between 1984 and 1992:

- year-12 retention were increased by 110 percent;
- university enrolments were increased by 57 percent; and
- TAFE enrolments went up by more than 25 percent.

We moved from a minority to a mass higher education and training system in less than a decade.

And many of the innovations we introduced like the Higher Education Contribution Scheme became models for change around the world.

Those reforms were needed to cope with a rapidly changing economic and social landscape created by new technological developments and new demands for skilled workers. And in the process they created one of Australia's largest export industries – higher education.

The economic and social change that made those reforms inescapable hasn't stopped. It has intensified.

And good as the Dawkins reforms were, many things were left undone and our higher education system hasn't kept pace with change.

In particular, we can see from the vantage point of 2008 that while the Dawkins reforms expanded access and opportunity, it wasn't access and opportunity for all.

The task now is to expand access and opportunity to everyone, regardless of the family or community they come from.

This Education Revolution must go further than Dawkins and it must improve equity and quality. Because we're falling behind in both.

It's going to require a whole new approach that encompasses the entirety of our education system, because universities alone can't solve our educational problems. An approach:

- that invests in people's skills across the lifecycle, from the early years to post-retirement;
- that empowers them to aspire more, contribute more and make meaningful choices that suit their interests and needs;
- that reforms institutions to create higher capacity, higher expectations and higher performance;
- and that sets clear goals which are linked to new funding mechanisms that provide incentives for improvement and innovation.

So we need to start again, with a system-wide approach.

It's an approach that must invest in the early years when social inequality is all ready entrenching itself. We know, for instance, that by age three, the average child of a professional couple has a vocabulary of 1,100 words and an I.Q. of 117, whilst the average child of parents receiving welfare has a vocabulary of 525 words and an I.Q. of 79.

The English researcher Leon Feinstein has found that less able richer children overtake more able poorer children by the age of six unless the right programs are in place.

And it distresses Australians to contemplate that Indigenous Australians – who are often among the poorest of our citizens – are well behind the rest of the community in literacy, numeracy and other education outcomes from the earliest age.

So the more we invest early, the greater the educational improvements we can make.

We also have to lift the performance of our schools – but particularly the most disadvantaged schools in the country. That's why we are committed to getting new resources to those schools and improving teacher quality through new national partnerships with the states and territories.

But significant reform is needed in our universities themselves.

WHAT IMPROVEMENTS DO OUR UNIVERSITIES NEED?

Firstly, the problems.

There's one over-arching problem facing our universities: stagnating levels of public funding.

Between 1995 and 2005 public investment in tertiary education increased by 49.4 percent across the OECD, but in Australia it increased by zero percent. That's right: zero.

In that time Australia's share of public expenditure on tertiary institutions fell from nearly two-thirds to less than a half. But while we're pleased our universities have been able to increase their own sources of funding, this

should have enabled them to significantly increase quality not just make up for the public shortfall.

All this makes the last decade of strong economic growth a massive wasted opportunity for Australia's universities.

As our universities have confronted funding challenges so have our researchers. Our other crucial task is to promote research excellence. The links between knowledge production through research and development and productivity and economic growth are well known. Other nations are leaping ahead of us. China, for instance, has been increasing its investment in Research and Development by more than 20 per cent a year over the last decade, and its output of science publications has increased by 16 percent per year. In the same time Australia's R&D investment has declined by a quarter as a proportion of GDP and our scientific publications have increased by just 2 percent.

Our universities also have long-term equity issues that must be addressed.

People with disabilities, from regional areas, Indigenous backgrounds and low socio-economic families are all significantly under-represented in our universities and are falling further behind. In fact, as I have mentioned before, the participation rate of students from lower socio-economic status background in higher education, fell from 15.1 per cent to 14.6 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

Another cause for concern is our high drop-out rate, which is made worse by low student satisfaction levels and ideologically driven policies such as Voluntary Student Unionism, which stripped universities of support services and detracted from the quality of campus life. So we need to make sure that our universities and TAFEs support students adequately so that they can complete their qualifications.

WHAT HAVE WE DONE SO FAR?

The Government has already made a strong start addressing these issues.

We have established an \$11 billion Education Investment Fund. This fund will provide substantial resources for major capital works in our universities, major research institutes and in our vocational education and training sector.

We provided \$500 million of Better Universities Renewal Funding, which has allowed our universities to begin the project of capital renewal.

We have phased out full-fee places at domestic public universities, because we believe that access to education should be based on merit and not on ability to pay, and have provided affected universities with extra public places and funding.

We have doubled the number of undergraduate scholarships available from 44,000 to 88,000 by 2012 – to improve equity.

We have also reduced HECS/HELP by half for maths and science students, and by half again for students who become teachers in these areas.

Early childhood teachers who work regional and high-disadvantage areas will also have their debts reduced by half.

And just this week the Government has moved to undo the damage caused by the Liberals Voluntary Student Unionism legislation by announcing we will allow universities to charge a small compulsory fee to fund important student services. A fee that students will be able to put onto their HECS.

This will provide universities with the funding stream they need to support much needed amenities and services and ensure a high quality student experience.

AND WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE?

Our universities have done remarkably well in the face of Commonwealth neglect over the last decade.

With 6 universities in the Times Higher Education Supplement's top 50, Australian institutions can hold their heads high.

We can also point to some quite amazing research achievements. Professor Ian Frazer was recently awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for science for his work developing the vaccine for cervical cancer, Australia's continues to punch above its weight in medical research.

But as I said, we need big, system-wide improvements. Piecemeal change won't be enough in a world where higher education is such an important determinant of prosperity and social equity.

And to guide this, the Government has initiated the first serious and independent major review of higher education in Australia in more than a decade.

The Bradley Review is examining the long term issues and opportunities facing our universities: in funding, system design, equity and access, excellence and regulation.

We will be receiving and releasing the Bradley report in December and it's our intention to release the Government's response to its directions in February next year.

The Bradley Review presents us with a unique opportunity to refashion universities and the broader tertiary education system to meet the needs of the future. For too long this nation has lacked a strategic vision of what we want our universities and tertiary education system to look like and achieve in 10 and 20 years time.

Building a new era won't be quick or easy.

And studying and researching at the highest levels will always take discipline, aptitude and fortitude.

There never will be such thing as an easy PhD.

But clearly I want to create a system where there are the right incentives to encourage universities to provide the best possible education to all our young people, and a system which properly supports individuals to study so they are able to invest in their human capital over the course of their life.

And we must deliver equity. Economically, our nation will be the poorer if we do not make the most of the talents and potentials of all our people. Morally, our nation will be the weaker if we leave unanswered for another 60 years Robert Menzies challenge to provide educational equity.

By addressing issues such as these, the Bradley Review will promote substantial change, and a system that meets the needs of the times.

It's my intention that the improvements it ushers in will make this a worthy successor to the Dawkins era.

CONCLUSION

But ultimately, achieving change is about more than the actions of government, though the actions of government matter.

Valuing our universities, valuing academia, valuing the pursuit of knowledge is about the thoughts, actions and instincts of our whole society.

Government can lead by not characterising universities as ivory towers divorced from the real world but characterizing the success of our universities as places seamlessly joined to broader success of our society.

Government can lead by nourishing and sustaining research and learning.

But it is the nation's citizens themselves that will make the final decision about breaking the shackles of anti-intellectualism that have been holding us back at a crucial time for education in our nation's history.

I trust those shackles are breaking and that this country will strive to ensure that should they choose academia, the young people who have graduated here today will be able to build a career in a vibrant higher education system that meets the needs of all our people and that helps make us one of the most highly educated and skilled nations on earth.

Thank you.