

## **Ask not what our country can do for education, ask what education can do for our country**

In my presentation today I will be considering these three questions that encompass a consideration of the value of education:

- How does education benefit the individual?
- How does education benefit society?
- Who should pay?

To assist this discussion I will be drawing heavily on my experience in higher education but the principles concerned are generally applicable to education as a whole.

### **So, to begin ...**

In biology, the success of a species is based on its ability to survive and reproduce. Hence to gauge its success we can look to measures such as the size of its population, its success at supplanting other species and its ability to alter its habitat for its own use. On all of these measures, humans register as being supremely successful - we are plentiful, we effectively utilise the planet on which we live to suit our own ends and we have managed to adapt to be able to live in all but the most extreme environments available to us.

But how have we managed to be so successful? It has been famously noted that we're not the fastest, nor the biggest, nor the strongest of all the species - and we're certainly not the cutest as that honour belongs to Pistol and Boo...

... but, of course, we are the smartest; and together with possessing an opposable thumb, an inherent curiosity and complex means of communication, our intellect represents our great evolutionary strength. What's more we are able to learn, both individually throughout our own lifetimes and as societies across generations; and this has sealed the deal in ensuring our success.

Think of the evolutionary strategy that humans have settled into in relation to child development.

Human babies are born immature and remain dependant and vulnerable for many many years – in fact for up to a fifth of their total lifespan. Compare this to the situation for a plains animal like the horse whose baby can stand and run with the herd just a few hours after birth. This strategy means that young horses are more likely to survive the attack of predators, live to adulthood and reproduce in order to carry on the species.

But it is the antithesis of the human strategy for childhood development. The long period of vulnerability and dependence on nurturing adults that is employed by humans means that they are more subject to predation or illness for a longer period, take up an immense amount of resources before they are able to give back to the community, and start to reproduce relatively late. This makes little sense from an evolutionary perspective until you factor in an appreciation that this affords the human child a long period in which to learn. Their vulnerability and dependence affords them long periods in close contact with doting adult teachers and like sponges they are programmed to soak it all up. This is what has ultimately made us successful as a species and our whole being is set up to facilitate a lifetime of learning.

No wonder then that education is afforded such a high level of importance. So much so, in fact, that it is considered a fundamental human right. As an educator I like to regularly remind myself of this special status of education. One of the great early achievements of the United Nations, which was set up after the Second World War to promote world peace, was the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Alongside the right to life, liberty and security of person, and the right to fair treatment under the law, Article 26(1) of this historic Charter states that:

*"Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. " <sup>1</sup>*

The importance of education was astutely captured by Nelson Mandela who described it as: *"... the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"*.

Education is indeed something very special and precious.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

It is easy to identify the many benefits that education affords the individual. This is particularly evident when considering the benefits of a higher education.

University graduates gain skills, knowledge and professional qualifications that are recognised and respected worldwide. This tends to afford graduates relatively higher rates of pay and greater financial stability – with Australian university graduates, on average, earning three-quarters of a million dollars more than non-graduates over the course of a lifetime. This is consistent with the general trend of: "The more you learn the more you earn."

Graduates also tend to enjoy lower unemployment rates as the job market is extremely competitive and skilled employees are high in demand. Of course, degrees are required for a wide range of elite careers such as Medicine, Engineering, Architecture and Law; but university graduates also tend to be more flexible and adaptable to changing trends in the workforce. In the sector we talk about graduates being future-proofed - they can weather change and be successful no matter what the future throws at them. This is because they have acquired important transferable skills such as the ability to think objectively and rationally, to make informed decisions based on the effective use of information, and to think outside the box. Hence, graduates tend to have much more control of their own career and its direction. Overall, graduates tend to express higher job satisfaction than non-graduates.

In short, a university education positions graduates to be successful in both today's and tomorrow's workforce and to establish enjoyable careers of their own choosing. It provides the basis for individuals to overcome disadvantage – to move beyond the lottery of the circumstances of their birth through social mobility – and to create and take advantage of a wider range of opportunities.

However, the considerable economic and lifestyle benefits arising from attaining professional careers are not the only benefit that an individual experiences from university study. Education is in every sense a transformational experience and, again, this is very evident in the case of higher education attainment. University education exposes students to new ideas and technologies, encourages creative and independent thought, exposes students to other cultures and backgrounds, and provides endless opportunities for new and exciting life experiences. University students are encouraged to achieve and excel, to

conquer intellectual challenges and develop a sense of achievement, and to build initiative and leadership skills that can be used for life. University is also where students build their first adult networks – meeting friends and mentors that become future contacts and colleagues.

Importantly, a university education provides us the basis for exploring the full range of our creativity and capacity to innovate, and inspires us to continue to learn throughout our lives – for both our own benefit and for the benefit of our communities.

So a university education positions students not only for enjoyable and satisfying careers but for an all-round fulfilling and successful life. It puts your life in your own hands.

Likewise, when looking at the benefits that a university educated citizenry brings to society, there are major economic benefits, but also important other benefits as well.

Governments are well aware that human capital – measured as “educational attainment” – is a major factor influencing economic growth.<sup>2</sup> By enabling a skilled workforce, education ensures that Australia is innovative, productive and internationally competitive. But the economic benefits don't stop there.

Being higher paid, graduates tend to pay higher taxes over their lifetimes, are less dependent on welfare, and because they tend to be healthier – including through having lower rates of smoking and obesity – tend to place less of a strain on health services.

It is actually possible to quantify quite accurately the economic benefit afforded to countries by educational attainment. For example, it has been demonstrated that one additional year of education in a country's educational attainment represents: a 3-6% increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and a 1% increase in rate of growth for the national economy.<sup>3</sup> In addition, raising average adult literacy scores by 1% above the international average, results in labour productivity of 2.5% and GDP of 1.5% above average.<sup>4</sup>

Given the benefits that education provides to the national economy, it is not surprising that education policy has become closely linked with economic policy in modern politics. Governments today speak of

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/events/pd\\_con\\_snr\\_school\\_mcgaw.pdf](https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/events/pd_con_snr_school_mcgaw.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Education at a Glance (EAG) 2006, pp.156-157

<sup>4</sup> EAG 2006, pp.155

education's role in getting people into a job and meeting workforce needs. However, unfortunately this enthusiasm for the economic benefits of education tends to mean that they downplay the role of education in developing the whole individual and the impact that this has on society. This is a major mistake. It is critically important that the undeniable economic benefits to the nation of education are not allowed to overshadow the major social and other benefits that education provides - benefits that have been recognised, appreciated and recorded since at least the time of Aristotle some two-and-a-half millennia ago. In fact, by fully recognising the power of education, policy makers could better address the diverse societal challenges with which we are currently faced.

Let's consider the following. Education influences the development of an individual's values and ethics, and provides the basis for thinking independently and exploring new ideas. In this way, education prepares us for effective citizenship. Learned people are better able to understand, make informed judgements on and be critical of the impact of political processes. They are also more likely to become engaged in these processes and to try to make a difference.

The impact of education in engaged citizenship is clearly evident through available data. For example in 27 OECD countries where voting is not compulsory, 80 per cent of young tertiary graduates say they vote while only 54 per cent of young adults who have not completed upper secondary education do so.

Importantly, educated people hold their politicians to account, make informed decisions when casting their vote, and demand coherent, coordinated and fair policy. In today's society, this critical citizenship is needed more than ever.

Here's an example. In The Australian newspaper on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May there was an article with the daunting headline "Democracy under threat as trust in system broken". It described research commissioned by the Business Council of Australia on peoples' attitudes to our current political environment. This research reported that a massive 94 per cent of people believe that Australia "needs a better plan for its long term future". However, the article went on to comment that:

*"At the heart of the research is a paradox. People's fears are such that they realise that the policy status quo is increasingly untenable – yet they are apprehensive about the ability of the political class to make viable and fair changes."*

I don't see this as a paradox at all. In fact what the research is saying couldn't be clearer or more logical. What it demonstrates is that a discerning and critical electorate is telling politicians that they appreciate the need for change but don't trust politicians to do it well or fairly. This is not "Democracy under threat" as the title of the article suggests. Quite to the contrary, it is democracy very much in action as a result of an increasingly aware, critical and sceptical electorate. At the heart of this is a well-educated society hungry to keep itself engaged and informed, with the ability to analyse and form a deep understanding of issues, and not easily fooled. This is a good thing, and something that politicians have yet to come to grips with.

Education also supports social cohesion. The capacity to find non-violent and effective solutions to problems, to enable each of us to understand and have empathy for other peoples' points of view, to provide pathways for social mobility and to benefit from diversity - all provides a strong basis for a civil society based on social harmony and mutual prosperity. Increased civic engagement is a feature of a more highly educated society with educated individuals more willing and more able to want to contribute to and give back to their communities. For all these reasons, an educated society is more likely to hold together.

As a corollary to being healthier, highly educated people also tend to live longer and more active lives. On average across 15 OECD countries, a 30-year-old male tertiary graduate can expect to live another 51 years, while a 30 year-old man who has not completed upper secondary education can expect to live an additional 43 years. For women the comparison is less stark but still significant.<sup>5</sup>

This means that educated societies have greater human resources available to them for a longer period, have citizenry that is more willing and able to contribute to the community outside of paid employment and have greater opportunity for the cross-fertilisation of ideas across generations. Politicians talk about "the ageing population" as presenting challenges. In practice this is certainly the case. However, there is far too little thought being given to the opportunities and benefits that living longer and younger affords our society. These benefits must not only be recognised but celebrated.

So we can say without question that education brings profound and wide-

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B010%20\(eng\)--v9%20FINAL%20bis.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B010%20(eng)--v9%20FINAL%20bis.pdf)

ranging benefits to society that parallel and build on the benefits that it affords individuals.

**So far in my presentation** I have explored the multiple objectives and benefits of education both for individuals – for which the relative importance of each of these objectives and benefits can be very personal - and for society as a whole.

Before closing I would like to spend a moment exploring a problem that is currently vexing Australia – how much should be spent on education and who should pay for it?

Firstly, there's a need to bust an urban myth - that is that higher education represents a heavy burden on the Australian tax payer.

In fact, on the latest data available in 2012, Australia ranks as 30th out of 31 OECD nations in terms of the proportion of GDP invested in higher education. We're that little orange column second from the right on the graph!

So it is hard to argue that Australia overspends on higher education. Quite the contrary, in relation to our international trading partners and competitors we significantly under-spend.

Students today, of course, make a very significant financial contribution to their own university education. At present students contribute to about 40 per cent of the cost of their degree study and the government invests 60 per cent. There are different views as to whether this proportion represents a fair balance.

It is not an easy question to answer. It requires one to consider the relative benefits to the individual and to society, one's own views on the relationship and relative obligations between an individual and the community, as well as questions of whether raising costs to students will create inequities by discouraging people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university. Australian students can access a very generous loan scheme that is zero-interest and which only requires re-payments to be made once the students earn over a set income threshold, currently \$53,000. Not having to pay up-front does provide opportunity for all who are able to access university, but the level of student debt, even under such generous terms, is still a major consideration.

You may not be aware but the university reform package that the government has yet to get through the Senate included reforms in addition

to the undergraduate fee deregulation that has tended to dominate the public discussion. In particular, it included a proposal that the government reduce its financial contribution and oblige students to pay more - raising the relative contributions to 50:50. This effort by the government to reduce its level of funding by 20 per cent seriously compromised the proposal to allow student fees to be uncapped as it was soon revealed that many students would be paying over \$6,000 more per year of study even before the impact of increased fees due to deregulation kicked in. The cumulative impact on students was considered by many to be just too great and the government's university reform package has struggled ever since.

Even though the government's higher education reform proposals have failed twice in the Senate, the government is persisting with them. This, therefore, is an unfinished story.

So in conclusion, education provides major benefits to individuals and to societies. Jobs and economies feature strongly in this mix, but these are not the whole story. Education also provides major social, cultural and community benefits, and the impact of higher education on individuals' lives is profound.

It is undeniable that education represents a good investment for both individuals and societies.

Thank you. I welcome your thoughts and questions.