

# What value does Australia place on its schools?

by

**Professor Brian J Caldwell** 

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#### WHAT VALUE DOES AUSTRALIA PLACE ON ITS SCHOOLS?

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Australia's performance on international tests is low and falling, with 32 countries performing significantly better on at least one test in PISA and TIMSS in 2015. While Queensland's average score on each test was lower than the score for Australia as a whole, it is statistically the same for all but one of the seven tests (Mathematics Literacy). If Queensland was a country in its own right it performed the same as Spain and between Iceland and Luxembourg in Mathematics Literacy. Concerns about Australia's performance apply also to Queensland.

In this address I draw on findings in my recent international study on Strategic Alignment and High-Performing School Systems to show how, when comparisons are made against important benchmarks, top-performing countries place a higher value on their schools than does Australia. How have we have got to this point and what should be done about it?

We agreed on the topic earlier this year, before the Prime Minister ignited debate about Australian values and how these should be addressed in meeting requirements for citizenship. In this context it is fair to ask about the value that should be placed on education in general and schools in particular regardless of where we end up in this debate. Kenneth Wiltshire, co-chair of the review of the Australian Curriculum believes that 'The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority should introduce more explicitly into the curriculum the values that the government has recently introduced for citizenship' (Wiltshire 2017).

These matters are also relevant to Gonski 2.0. The Australian Government's proposed funding framework for the next decade has been announced and hand-to-hand combat is underway on its merits. What Gonski has been commissioned to do is to recommend how funds should be deployed to reach the goal of Australia achieving a rank in the top ten of the highest-performing nations around the world. This will almost certainly take Gonski into matters such as curriculum, pedagogy and governance. I believe there is robust evidence on strategies to achieve such an outcome. Gonski's challenge is to recommend how they should cohere and, critically, what is the optimal

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approach to implementation in different settings. I raise the possibility that the value placed by Australia on its schools is lower than in the top-performers to the extent that it will limit what can be achieved or in other ways act as a 'drag' or 'tax' on efforts to achieve a transformation on the scale intended.

It is important to make clear at the outset that I do not set out to challenge commitments and priorities of governments of different persuasion and ministers who serve in them. Frankly I have never worked with or for a minister for education who has not been determined to make a positive contribution even though ideologies and strategies may differ. Nor do I challenge the commitments and priorities of schools, their principals and the communities they serve. Nor am I saying that Australia does not appreciate its schools. My work in many countries in recent decades satisfies me that some of the best schools anywhere may be found in our nation and in the state of Queensland. I do however present a new and potentially far-reaching challenge: can there be a shift in the way the nation at large places a value on its schools to the extent that it provides a robust platform on which governments, school authorities and schools can move with confidence to achieve a profound transformation? Hand-to-hand combat may continue but on a higher plane!

#### International benchmarks

The insights I share in this address are based to a large extent on international comparative research I have conducted over the last decade, especially in the current year as part of the International Study on School Autonomy and Learning (ISSAL) that commenced in 2014 involving researchers from seven countries: Australia, Canada, China, England, Finland, Israel and Singapore. Australia's contributions in the first two years are contained in *The Autonomy Premium* (Caldwell 2016a) and in a national survey of principals reported in *What the Principals Say* (Caldwell 2016b). In 2017 our study extends to twelve countries: Australia, Canada, China (Hong Kong), England, Estonia, Finland, Israel, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and United States. These included ten that performed significantly higher than Australia in at least one test in PISA and TIMSS in 2015. The question that guided our efforts was 'How have high-performing jurisdictions achieved strategic alignment across different levels of government when formulating and implementing policy to improving student performance?'

A report of the project will be available later this year. What follows is a first take on several findings which raise important issues on how we value our schools. These issues emerge when we describe what occurs in Australia on six of 15 benchmarks. Rather than the traditional view that benchmarks specify structures and processes to which all jurisdictions should aspire or learn from,

benchmarks in the project refer to domains, structures, processes and outcomes on which nations can be compared in a descriptive rather than normative sense.

Fifteen benchmarks were identified, with twelve that facilitate comparisons in accounting for current high performance and three on roles in adaptability or sustaining high performance in the longer term. There is a high level of commonality and interconnectivity across and within the benchmarks.

# Benchmarks in securing current levels of performance

- 1. Trust
- 2. Constitutional arrangements
- 3. Number of levels of government
- 4. Educational history
- 5. Establishment of current roles
- 6. Societal valuing of education
- 7. Priority attached to the human resource
- 8. Local government
- 9. Number of schools administered
- 10. Disruptive change in education
- 11. School autonomy
- 12. Professional capacity

# Benchmarks in adaptability

- 13.Innovation in education
- 14. Preparing for the future
- 15. Alignment of education, economy and society

# **Benchmarking Australia**

Where does Australia stand on how it values its schools among the 15 benchmarks? I have selected six: trust; educational history; societal valuing of education; priority attached to the human resource; innovation in education; and alignment of education, economy and society. These are inter-related and there is no particular order in which they should be addressed. The benchmarks are not values in themselves but there are values at play in the way we deal with them in policy and practice.

#### Trust

Trust among stakeholders is invariably listed as a characteristic of outstanding performance. Narratives on policy in school education in several countries referred to a high level of trust. It is particularly evident in some of the world's top-performing school systems, including Estonia, Finland, Japan and

Singapore. It has become a cliché that in Finland, 'everyone trusts schools, and in schools, everyone trusts teachers'. Among other factors, much of this trust reflects the quality of initial teacher education. Finland famously admits only 10 percent of applicants to its masters' programs in teaching. Teaching is the top field in universities in terms of demand. There is evidence that principals in Finland do not engage in detailed oversight of teaching and learning to the extent they do or should do in many other countries, including Australia, because they trust their teachers to know what to do and when to do it.

Public discourse and media headlines often suggest a lower than desirable level of trust in schools and school systems in Australia. Frankly, I have seen no counterpart to the continuous battles between different levels of government that characterise the scene in Australia, and this does little to enhance public trust. I include here the debates and conflicts about funding for schools that have raged for more than 50 years. We have had seemingly endless debates about the quality of teaching, frequently unfair in my view. However, compared to high-performing countries, we do not have the same rigorous standards for entry to teacher education in many of our universities and it is only recently that governments have shown interest in more rigorous screening among applicants for appointment after they graduate.

Related to the foregoing is the trust that governments have in their public schools and the matter of autonomy. It is nearly 60 years since Peter Karmel recommended a higher level of responsibility and authority for schools in his famous report in 1973 – he called it devolution – but it is only in the last decade that there has been a significant breakthrough in some jurisdictions. I have heard comments along the lines that 'schools don't have the skills', 'schools don't know how to take up the autonomy they already have', or 'more autonomous schools threaten a system view and the need for equity'. I am delighted that distinctions can now be made between structural autonomy, which may have little or no impact, and professional autonomy, with impressive programs on building the capacity of school boards, principals and teachers to make better decisions in the interests of students.

Much of the debate about autonomy and its impact on learning has been about schools in the public sector. However, the concept applies especially to those in the private sector which, after all, are by-and-large the most autonomous schools in Australia. In this regard, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) has just released a discussion paper on autonomy and school leadership based on case studies of how autonomy is exercised in five schools (Watterston 2017).

# Educational history

Most of the high-performing countries have a long educational history extending over many centuries. Australia, in contrast has had systems of public education for less than 150 years. Following European settlement in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, colonies had schools that were administered by local bodies or by churches, mostly based on what had developed over many centuries in England. Systems of public education emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century ('free, compulsory, secular') but it took until the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before significant numbers of state secondary schools were created. Meanwhile, the non-state sector maintained its position to the point that it now provides upper secondary education for more than 50 percent of students in parts of our largest cities. This contrasts with the strength of public education in the highperforming countries, approaching 100 percent of enrolments in Estonia, Finland, Japan and Singapore. Australia does not value or have confidence in its public schools to anywhere near the same extent. The importance of public education was established or resolved long ago in some of the top performers but settlement about the roles of public and private education has not been reached in Australia. The evidence is before us in debates about school funding.

This does not mean that Australia will or should end up with close to 100 percent of schools in the public sector should it become a high-performing nation. After all, in another international comparison, less than 10 percent of students in high-performing Hong Kong attend a state-owned school. The large majority attend schools owned and operated by a private or not-for-profit entity, including churches. In another country, Canada, matters related to governance and funding have long been settled. The federal government faces a constitutional bar to involvement in education, and there are separate fully-publicly funded systems of education for Catholic schools in the provinces. I took up a teaching position in Alberta in 1968 and left Australia at the peak of the state aid debates. I started teaching in Edmonton the following week. I was astonished to find on renting an apartment that I needed to complete a form to indicate whether local property taxes attributed to my lease should be directed to the public system or the Catholic system. Each system was funded from the public purse on the same basis.

### Societal valuing of education

Associated with the first two benchmarks (trust and educational history) is societal valuing of education. This is particularly evident in the top-ranked countries, reaching a peak in countries I have mentioned thus far. While there is acceptance of its importance in Australia, we fall short of the societal valuing in some of the highest-performing nations. For example, 'It is impossible to

understand the Japanese education system without looking a little more closely at the influence of traditional values of Japanese society' (Tucker and Ruzzi 2011).

There is, however, striking change in Australia that reflects the way first- and second-generation folk from other countries have changed our schools, especially selective schools. In some instances the large majority of students have a heritage that places a very high value on education. It may be argued that this high value is dysfunctional in some countries, giving rise to physically and emotionally draining after-hours tutoring, as in Japan. The terms 'education fever' or, more dismally 'educational rat-race' have been used to describe the passion for education in South Korea where there is serious incidence of youth suicide and only 60 percent of students report being happy at school, placing Korea at the bottom of nations; the OECD average is 80 percent.

# Priority attached to the human resource

There is realisation in some high-performing countries that the human resource is the most important resource in securing their future. There are few if any other resources or, where they have existed, they are declining. There is frank recognition in countries like Estonia, Hong Kong (China), Finland, Korea and Singapore that the development of the human resource is the top priority. Singapore is the stand-out example because the country has no resources other than its people. Education has been a driving factor in the journey from independence in 1965 to it being one of the region's economic powerhouses. A carefully designed and integrated approach to initial teacher education and leader development in Singapore is among the world's best, as highlighted in a recent report (Darling-Hammond & Associates 2017). There has been a similar transformation in the Republic of Korea since 1952.

However, readers of *The Economist* (2017a) last week were challenged by the cover story under the heading The World's Most Valuable Resource. Did it identify the human resource? No! The sub-heading was 'Data and the new rules of competition'. The authors declared that 'Data are to this century what oil was to the last one: a driver of growth and change'.

#### *Innovation in schools*

The OECD reports that innovation in schools is generally more extensive than is often understood and this is the case in Australia. An important issue is the extent to which innovation in schools contributes to innovation in a general sense. It is noteworthy that all high-performing nations in PISA and TIMSS are in the top 25 of countries on the Global Innovation Index (Australia is 19<sup>th</sup> of

126 countries/economies) with three filling the top ranks in terms of quality of innovation (Japan 1<sup>st</sup>, United States 2<sup>nd</sup>, United Kingdom 3<sup>rd</sup>). Results in PISA are taken into account in determining a country's numerical score on the index although performance on various indicators in higher education carries larger weight.

Back in 1991, writing in *The Entrepreneurial School* (Crowther & Caldwell 1991) Frank Crowther and I declared that schools have 'a greater capacity than any other institution to nurture a culture in which initiative, ingenuity and experimentation can be developed' and that 'there is good reason to be optimistic that our schools can lead the way in the revitalisation of our society and our culture'. If these beliefs still hold true, and can be reflected in public expectations for schools, they become values that should drive efforts to transform our schools. Speaking personally, I am not as confident in 2017 as I was in 1991. A qualification we offered in 1991 still applies:

As educators, then, surely we have to confront head-on the fact that notions like 'She'll be right, mate', 'No worries' and 'the lucky country' may be at the root of our problems. We have to consider that certain cherished aspects of our lifestyle have to be challenged and replaced by other values that, while not so obvious, are also part of our culture and identity. (Crowther & Caldwell 1991: 9)

Reaching back even further to 1977, Hedley Beare, than Chief Education Officer of the ACT Schools Authority offered 11 propositions in *The Beare Eleven* (Beare 1977), based on a presentation to staff. His introduction to Proposition 10 ('The education organisation should encourage innovation') was provocative: 'If we are not here to change the traditional modes of operating schools, what the hell are we here for?'

An interesting variation on the language of innovation was provided by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who noted in a speech at the World Economic Forum in 2016 that Canada, like Australia, had been known up to that point for the economic strength derived from its resources. Rather than call for innovation to generate other sources of economic strength he referred to resourcefulness: 'Canada was mostly known for its resources. I want you to know Canadians for our resourcefulness . . . We have a diverse and creative population, outstanding education and healthcare systems, and advanced infrastructure' (Trudeau 2017: 343). Resourcefulness may be a helpful concept for Australians who often baulk at the idea of innovation.

# Alignment of education, economy and society

In most of the top-performing nations there is a strong alignment of education, economy and society. Where that alignment is not strong there is a high priority in policymaking to make it so. All levels of government have been committed to such alignment in countries under consideration in my current research. It is most striking in countries where the human resource is preeminent, as is the case in Singapore, where important initiatives with attractive titles like *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* and *Teach Less, Learn More* have been enunciated by Prime Ministers of the day.

There is evidence of misalignment in Korea where the country produces more university graduates than it needs, with a significant shortfall of graduates in vocational education. We have witnessed large-scale demonstrations by young people in Korea is recent months. There were, of course, over-arching political issues but a recent commentary noted that 'Young South Koreans are deeply anxious. The number of graduates out of a job, or who have given up looking for one, recently exceeded 3.5 million out of a total of roughly 14 million' (The Economist 2017b).

There are some interesting parallels in Australia where it appears that we currently place a higher value on university education than on vocational education. Indeed there were headlines a few weeks back (Singhai 2017) that we were near the top of rankings world-wide in the motivation of our secondary students to study in universities. In Australia, 54 percent expect to go to university compared to an OECD average of 44 percent. This has been encouraged to some extent by successive governments as manifested, for example, in universities being free to admit as many qualified applicants as they wish. However, have we got the balance right? About 3 percent aim to complete a VET course; the OECD average is 15 percent.

Many of the top-performing countries have a system of basic education for nine years after which students make a choice between upper secondary education and polytechnic education. They may move from one stream to another if they change their minds, as is possible between continuing in universities or polytechnic colleges. Finland exemplifies this approach. Did Australian states make the wrong decision to abandon technical schools in favour of a single secondary stream? A modern polytechnic at the upper levels of schooling could be state-of-the-art in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, facilities and equipment and may make a major contribution in addressing concerns about performance in STEM or alleviating the need for overseas recruitment.

There is however some good news. KPMG's Bernard Salt, a demographer, observed (Salt 2017) that in the expanding part of Australia's economy, from 2000 to 2016, the number of jobs increased by 3.3 million whereas in the declining part, the number of jobs fell by 267,000 – a ratio of 12 to 1. He concluded that 'no peer nation has generated jobs across the economy as has Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. The growth sectors were healthcare and social assistance, professional services and construction. This is a good news story that is not widely appreciated. What was the key to this success and what are the implications for education? Salt declared that the 'pistons' driving this growth were skills. 'To participate in the prosperity of modern Australia, a worker needs a university degree or technical training. The best thing Aussie parents can do for their kids is to ensure they have some kind of technical skill or a university degree'. He calls for a focus on STEM and building capacities such as resilience, self-confidence, sociability and civic responsibility.

Jennifer Westacott, Chief Executive, Business Council of Australia, highlighted the current imbalance in what is valued in education and its alignment with the economy and society:

At the heart of the problem is our education culture, a culture that remains wedded to placing academic learning above vocational learning; one where theoretical learning is deemed superior to practical learning and universities are where the best and brightest go . . . We need a system where VET is no longer treated like a poor cousin and where the two sectors are treated equally. (Westacott 2017)

#### Inertia

Is there something more fundamental that explains an apparent 'values deficit' and the need to improve the alignment of education, economy and society. Here is what a leading Australian writer had to say about Australia's approach to its schools:

There is little planning to train a new kind of person as part of the process of economic development. There is mainly belated scrambling around the mounting slope of crisis.

The people who control education are largely dedicated to diluting it, while the material demands of society suggest that it should be made, if not harder, at least more effective, so that pupils learn more.

These views would be readily endorsed by some current commentators. Interestingly, they were written by Donald Horne in *The Lucky Country* (Horne 1964: 216-217) more than 50 years ago. I draw from Horne for two reasons.

The first relates to the currency of some of his views, although many of the shortcomings he identified in schools and school systems have been addressed in the intervening years. The second is that the theme of *The Lucky Country* may lie at the heart of the inertia in Australia to value its schools at the same level as some of the world's top performers. Horne believed that 'Australia has not deserved its good fortune' and that 'Australia will not be able to maintain its prosperity in the new technological age without profoundly changing its life patterns'. He concluded with a recitation of 'the good qualities' of Australians 'that could constitute the beginnings of a great nation' (Chapter 10).

Horne believed that 'the greatest single reform that seems to be needed in Australian education — and one of the most important reforms that could be made in Australia — is its decentralisation, to allow teachers to become members of the communities in which they teach, to allow principals of schools greater initiative, to develop a sense of professional responsibility amongst teachers, to allow variety and experiment, and to allow more community participation'. Peter Karmel made good on these matters in his famous report one decade later (Interim Committee of the Australian Schools Commission 1973) but it took almost half a century for professional standards for teachers and principals to be adopted.

# Good qualities, values and moral virtues

The value that Australia places on its schools depends to some extent on what is valued in its schools, as reflected, for example in its curriculum. I mentioned Donald Horne's reference to the good qualities of Australians. He believed 'these should be described and admired and brought into play'. He referred to their [our] non-doctrinaire tolerance, their sense of pleasure, their sense of fair play, their interest in material things, their sense of family, their identity with nature and their sense of reserve, their adaptability when a way is shown, their fraternalism, their scepticism, their talent for improvisation, their courage and stoicism' (Horne 1964: 252-253). These good qualities – call them values – should now also include 'their determination to create and support excellent schools for all'.

Media commentator Angela Shanahan expressed frustration at the current debate about values (Shanahan 2017): 'Politicians are particularly adept at values talk — vague and to some extent in a post-Christian society quite meaningless'. She moved to a higher plane in preferring 'moral virtues' to 'values'. Can we apply this to our commitment to schools? I have touched on some matters but there is a much larger issue, beyond the scope of this address. Shanahan suggested that young people 'don't really know or care what values we are talking about. This points to huge deficiencies in the

education system, which has become highly technocratic, lacking any depth in literature, history, philosophy and religion'. This takes us into the area of curriculum, a field that I have taken a particular interest in over the last three years as Deputy Chair of ACARA.

# How can Australia place a higher value on its schools?

The first is to recognise the seriousness of the situation. Australia has little chance of achieving a top ten ranking unless it addresses the matters I have raised. The second is to accept that this is a national project of the highest significance that will require extraordinary effort over many years. The third is to appreciate that this does not involve doing what we are already doing but trying harder or even smarter. In terms of what lies ahead in 2017, I have no doubt that David Gonski and his team can provide a coherent and comprehensive framework for allocating resources to good effect. The knowledge base is robust. But there will be a 'tax' or 'drag' on their efforts and on policymakers and practitioners around the nation if Australia's performance on international benchmarks is a guide.

The agenda can be described in straightforward terms:

- bi-partisan effort everywhere
- serious reform of initial teacher education
- empowering schools through higher levels of professional autonomy
- harnessing the motivations of those whose heritage places a high value on school education
- declaring and acting on recognition that our most importance resource is the human resource, and not waiting around for another boom, mining or otherwise
- invigorating an innovative culture in our schools by encouraging and rewarding resourcefulness
- securing a better alignment of education, society and economy, especially in re-balancing upper secondary and polytechnic education as well as university and vocational education
- making it as clear in Australia as it is in the high-performing nations what values should underpin our efforts, including what is taught and learned

Principals can lead the effort in their schools and communities, but this is a cause that demands commitment and effort on an unprecedented scale, and a profound change in culture, if Australia is to become the great nation we want it to be.

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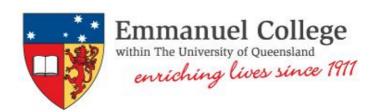
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