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We are missing the mark on national education policy

Simon Marginson
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Policy makers need to shun short-term politics for long-term vision.

EDUCATION, science and scholarship are the tools for understanding and coping with the many challenges facing us in future. But Australians need to consider whether the tools this country has at its disposal will be sufficient to meet these challenges.

Compared to education, training and research in North America, Western Europe, Singapore, Korea and China, Australia is going backwards. Our total spending on education was once well above the OECD average. Now, at 5.8 per cent of GDP, it has fallen below the average and trails the United States and Korea, which spend 7.5 per cent. And, while our spending on private education is higher than average, public spending is just 4.3 per cent, compared with the OECD average of 5.2 per cent.

Australia has two research universities in the world's top 100 (ANU at No. 54 and Melbourne at 78) but the UK has 11, Canada and Sweden each have four and even tiny Switzerland has three.

Because education is essentially an investment in the future there is always a danger that governments fixated on opinion polls will neglect it. Regrettably, public policy over the last two decades has left the nation with four crucial weaknesses in this area.

Firstly, though it is now well recognised that early learning at ages three to five years is the foundation for everything that happens later, only 42 per cent of Australian three and four-year-olds are enrolled in pre-school programs. We spend an infinitesimal 0.1 per cent of GDP on early learning (one-fifth of the OECD average) and we staff our pre-schools with the worst-paid teachers when they ought to be among the best.

Secondly, only 77 per cent of our 15 to 19-year-olds are in education. In Canada, it's 91 per cent. Comparative standards testing shows that, while our high achievers at school are as good as those of other nations, our low achievers are not. The legacy of weak early learning and a divided school system is an underclass of people who leaves school early, with poor job prospects.

Thirdly, after early learning, vocational education and training is the most under-funded area of education, the casualty of a decade of buck-passing and blame-shifting between federal and state governments since their funding agreement collapsed in the late 1990s.

Finally, higher education is now just 41 per cent government-funded. Since 1995, public funding for each student has fallen by 30 per cent, much the largest such decline in the OECD. Fee-based courses have expanded to fill the gap. A quarter of all students in Australian universities are now fee-paying overseas students.

Trade in education is worth \$9.5 billion a year, the fourth largest export sector after coal, iron and tourism. But the shift from public to private funding has inadvertently thinned out the capacity of Australian universities in basic research, formerly supported through publicly funded teaching-research positions. International student fees do not generate enough surplus to fund research. China and Singapore are now investing in research more vigorously than Australia.

Increasingly, national

weaknesses in these areas will limit our achievements in science, industry, business, government and society. These are not the only issues. Consider the state of public schools, the relationship between industry and education and training, student financial support, indigenous education, the status of teaching — surely these are more important than the point-scoring that currently grabs the headlines, such as the "culture wars" over history.

In theory, all these problems could be solved in the medium to longer term. But that will require considerable effort, intelligence, resources, consultation and goodwill. It can only happen if governments become more mature about federal-state relations.

Whether Australia is able to move forward in this sector so vital to our future prosperity and harmony will depend on the quality of public policy-making and implementation — on whether public policy can take a long-term, outcomes-driven view. This might just depend on whether the public interest can make itself heard in policy development.

Simon Marginson is a professor of higher education at the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Putting the "public" into public policy in addressing these issues is the goal of a five-part series of seminars on "Education, science and the future of Australia". The first will be held at the university at 6pm today. Register at www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/publicpolicyseminars

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