

# Forward thinking

Today's students face an uncertain future, and innovative, visionary teaching is needed to prepare them for it. **CAROLYN RANCE** reports.

**A**ustralian children are being bombarded with information and mixed messages like never before. While the commercial media propagates the myth that everyone can have everything they want, economists caution that Australia's growing debt threatens future prosperity, and environmentalists warn that unrestrained capitalism could lead to catastrophic climate change.

Striking a balance between fostering optimism and raising students' awareness of world realities will be a continuing challenge, says AEU federal president Pat Byrne. With political and economic groups increasingly weighing into discussions of what a 21st century education should be, teachers must ensure their voices are heard, she says.

Union efforts to engage teaching professionals in the debate—and provide a framework for thinking about the future—has resulted in the document *Educational Leadership and Teaching for the Twenty First Century: A Desirable Scenario* (ELaT21), which

looks at the present and future role of education.

While its creators—principals, teachers, academics and union representatives—have produced an optimistic document on the whole, they have not shied away from acknowledging the likely adverse consequences of global trends, says Byrne. She hopes their view that education should be a “broad and rich” preparation for citizenship and community, as well as for employment, will act as a counterpoint to voices that

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discuss education purely in terms of economic outcomes.

Roy Martin, the AEU federal research officer who coordinated production of the document, hopes it will help teachers avoid being swept along by the overly dire predictions of doomsayers.

In looking at the teaching challenges of the next 10–15 years, the writers concluded that at least some predictions about


## → Briefly

- Educators are recognising the need for a new framework to prepare students for a world very different from that of previous generations.
- Teachers need to have a strong voice to influence what a 21st century education should be.
- The time may be right for a “substantial curriculum conversation” to ensure classroom content reflects societal realities.

the future—and the role of schools within it—are ideologically driven and hyperbolic. “The likely changes are frequently exaggerated, with adapting to the future portrayed as a seismic shift in practice,” they say.

Yet there can be little doubt that external change will challenge the curriculum and values taught to public school students. Materialism and an increasing bias toward individualism have diluted the moral, spiritual and community values that guided the much simpler world of their grandparents and, to a lesser extent, their own parents.

These aren't easy days for advocates of fairness and equity, said Monash University historian and author Dr Mark Peel in *The Australian Review of Public Affairs* in February. “During the last 20 years, governments have overseen, promoted and sometimes celebrated a significant redistribution of resources, jobs and life chances that has consistently favoured some Australians and penalised others... The poor haven't got poorer, but they are a lot further behind the



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rich than they used to be... Citizens are encouraged to believe that everyone has an agenda, that every argument for change or continuity is just spin and that they must look after themselves and their own."

It's a depressing portrayal for people committed to a strong public school system that promotes principles of social justice, fairness and equity, and one unlikely to be improved by the march of globalisation with its inherent contradictions.

For young people, the notion of being part of a transnational community, with a common language and culture, and a peer group just a click of the mouse away, has obvious attractions. Yet

engaging more closely with the world involves cultural, economic and social costs as well as benefits. For example, Chinese demand for raw materials is driving a stock market boom that is boosting private wealth and super-annuation returns in Australia. However, Asia's economic growth has also led to a decline in manufacturing elsewhere and been used to justify deregulation of labour markets in Australia and other western economies.

### Increasing pressure

As anxiety over global change grows, teachers could find themselves under increasing pressure to focus on the economic role of schools in meeting skills

## Your say

**Dr Mary Fogarty, deputy principal, Turramurra High School, NSW**

"We are educating students who will meet future challenges by analysing issues, understanding them and then responding accordingly... They will become adept at building social relationships and promoting justice and equity in a truly civil society."



**Andrew Bell, deputy principal and teacher, Merredin Senior High School, WA**

"While we must step up to the challenge, teacher workload is crippling and the demand on teachers is higher than ever before. Consequently, acknowledgement of the role of our teachers must be a key priority in the political forum. Governments must appreciate that, if we fail our teachers now, we will surely fail our nation's future."



## Deepening debate

At Glen Waverley Secondary College in Victoria, students are encouraged to think deeply about themselves as individuals and as members of a national and international community.

Asking “fertile” questions that prompt research, debate and sometimes community action is part of the college’s innovative approach to producing lifelong learners who can think their way through complex issues, says Annette Gilbert, head of curriculum.

Learning Enquiries in maths and English for Year 7 students are based on the Communities of Thinking curriculum model developed by Yoram Harpaz and Adam Lefstein. “It’s a shift from an ‘answering’ to a ‘questioning’ pedagogy,” says Gilbert. “Instead of the teacher asking all the questions, the model allows students to pose their own research questions. Through careful scaffolding of the learning activities, students gain the skills required to answer the questions through good research and inquiry.”

In English, the students are tackling the question “What lies beneath?” They are exploring the power of language and analysing how producers of texts, websites and other media seek to appeal to and influence audiences.

In maths, students are looking at whether beauty can be described mathematically. “It’s about trying to produce skills that are transferable and getting them to look beyond traditional subject boundaries.”

Interdisciplinary Learning Enquiries take the concept further, encouraging students to draw on knowledge and skills from a number of different disciplines to research their

question or solve problems.

In Year 7 they focus on the question “Who am I?”, building personal and interpersonal skills, and developing resilience as learners. They learn more about themselves by exploring their family history and culture, and examine family traits through the study of genetics and inheritance.

In Year 8 they think about themselves as part of a wider community, exploring whether and how a community can thrive without threatening or harming another community. They do this across science, SOSE and English. In science, for example, they concentrate on environmental issues, gaining an understanding of sustainability and interdependence between organisms.

In Year 9 they approach the question of whether life is getting better or worse.

“Throughout all this there is an underlying theme—you can make a difference. We want them to be able to take action in the real world,” says Gilbert.

“Last year one of the Year 8 groups looked at poverty and homelessness. They took a video camera to the Salvation Army and interviewed staff. Later, on their own initiative, they put together a basket of goods and presented it to the Salvation Army. One of the girls said to me, ‘I don’t care what mark I get for this, it has been one of the best learning experiences I’ve ever had. Without it, I wouldn’t have known what a problem poverty and homelessness are in Melbourne. I want to do something about it.’

“We are focusing on deep learning and deep understanding that encourages insight.”



shortages and workforce needs, says John McCollow, research officer at the Queensland Teachers’ Union and one of ELaT21’s editors.

“Global competition will obviously influence curriculum, but the trick is going to be meeting economic objectives

## “The time is ripe for a “substantial curriculum conversation” across the profession...”

without letting them become the be-all and end-all of education,” says McCollow. “There is a real danger that the role schools play in creating civil society, shared values and a sense of common purpose will be left off the agenda. It’s easy to get caught up in the enthusiasm of becoming more globally competitive without looking at the downside for civil society.”

The future task for teachers is more than teaching specific subject-based knowledge and employment skills, the ELaT21 writers suggest. They should also give students “a sense of their own culture and where it fits into the broader spectrum of Australian



and world culture, a capacity to build and maintain social relationships in a society where there is considerable mobility and change and a dominant global monoculture... an understanding of society and how it works to the benefit of some more than others, and a sense of justice and equity as basic values”.

To achieve this, the relationship between governments, bureaucracies and public schools needs to undergo fundamental change to create “a more constructive relationship which acknowledges joint responsibility and works to common and agreed purposes”.

The writers suggest that the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) be recognised as the body best placed to achieve a consensus policy and become the principal forum for federal government and state/territory negotiations on schooling, funding allocations, national targets and the reporting of outcomes. They say a broadly representative Schools Advisory Council should be established as the principal forum for advice on national schooling, ensuring that discussions can take place “in an

appropriately independent but informed manner, and that the education community—including education workers, parents, and the broader social and business community—can develop a common understanding of where policy is and should be moving”.

### Appropriate responses

The challenges ahead will hopefully lead to a greater public appreciation of the role of public schools in preparing children for the future, says Professor Alan Reid, professor of education at the University of South Australia. Building “capacities and capabilities” into the population will be central to addressing the issues posed by globalisation and climate change. Appropriate responses will have to be devised. Educators are preparing children for a world that is difficult to imagine, Reid wrote last year in his report *Rethinking National Curriculum—Towards an Australian Curriculum*, for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. Many of the old structures and

**We need to be...more able to articulate what the broad outcomes of education should be.**

ways of doing things are still dominant, he said, while “technological change and globalisation in its various guises are compressing time and space, and changing the very nature of the way we communicate and understand and organise ourselves”.

He advocates national approaches to curriculum that can help students develop capabilities to live, work, sustain relationships and become active citizens of Australia and the world. By teaching and assessing for such capabilities through the various state curricula, teachers could help young people become not only more knowledgeable,

but also more innovative, ethical and participative.

Reid regards the New Basics in Queensland and discussion of Essential Learnings in other states as indications that educators are aware of the limitations of traditional curricula. The time is ripe for a “substantial curriculum conversation” across the profession, informed by the results of research into the various approaches being trialled. “We need to be more holistic in our ways of thinking... and more able to articulate what the broad outcomes of education should be.”

Roy Martin hopes educators will face the future with confidence, citing take-up of technology as an illustration of how well public school teachers can adapt to change and use it to enhance learning.

An increased focus on teaching children to think and embrace lifelong learning will challenge professionals to decompartmentalise their areas of specialisation, he says. As well as specialist skills in areas such as science, maths and languages, students will need to learn how one area of knowledge relates to another and the world beyond school.

“Teachers will have to keep up with changes in their own areas and more generally, and this will call for greater investment in professional development.”●

**CAROLYN RANCE** is a freelance writer.

## Resources

- **Educational Leadership and Teaching for the Twenty First Century: A Desirable Scenario:** download a summary and order form at [www.aeufederal.org.au](http://www.aeufederal.org.au), or phone (03) 9693 1800 to purchase a copy.