



## **THE HON PETER GARRETT MP**

Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth

12 October 2011

**Mick Young Oration, TAFE Directors Australia Conference**

**Mural Hall, Parliament House, ACT**

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### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we are meeting—the Ngunnawal people—and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

I extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are here today.

I'd also like to acknowledge:

- Stephen Conway, Chair of TAFE Directors Australia
- Members of the Board of TAFE Directors Australia
- Martin Riordan, CEO TAFE Directors Australia
- Mary and Janine Young
- Phil Bullock, Ray Wilson and Denise Bradley

### **Introduction**

It's a special occasion tonight and I'm pleased to share it with TAFE directors in Canberra for your national conference.

I'm also pleased to be following in the footsteps of the luminaries who have delivered this oration in previous years, Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the Treasurer Wayne Swan and former Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley.

One of my first public appearances as the newly-elected Member for Kingsford Smith in 2004 was to attend the Mick Young Scholarship Trust Race Day at Randwick racecourse.

The race day is a great way to remember Mick, who was of course a keen punter himself, and it is also a great way to promote the scholarships and the work of the Trust.

Just as Mick would have approved of the annual Race Day, so he would approve of our task tonight.

I went back to the condolence motion debated in the Parliament after his early death to capture the flavour of who he was from the people who knew him well.

Rod Sawford—who succeeded him as the Member for Port Adelaide—said that:

Mick was very passionate about education....

When I once informed him that kids in our area were dropping out of school and the level of tertiary participation was falling, he told me to set up a scholarship fund...'

Kim Beazley also spoke on the condolence motion and said:

'He also had a tremendous belief in what could be done at a local level, in the power of education and in the capacity for a person to be able to hook themselves up the ladder as a result of their getting a chance in life with education.

He also recognised that the formal systems would not necessarily always produce that.

Therefore one of the things he was very proud of as a local member was a scholarship scheme that he helped to fund and to put in place.'

These tributes allow us to imagine how much Mick would have approved of the Scholarship Trust set up in his name the year after his passing.

The Mick Young Scholarship Trust has been a beacon of light in giving young people hope and a helping hand just when they need it most.

Being an Ambassador for the Mick Young Scholarship Trust has been a genuinely heart-warming experience, seeing young people given support to study just when it is most likely to make the crucial difference.

I, and the government I serve, share with Mick Young a strong belief in the transformative power of education.

On being given high office himself he reflected on his own life journey, saying that:

“I think that the greatest lesson is that you can do it from the shearing shed.”

Amen to that.

This belief is at the centre of everything we do in education.

These are words that spark hope and possibility for any young Australian regardless of their circumstance.

### **The climate change debate**

Mick's background and his life journey reflect and reinforce the value of hope and belief in possibility.

Despite coming from a very different background I can relate to Mick's career journey.

In a very public career before entering parliament, I'd like to think I learned a fair bit along the way and have found some of it useful in this place.

If nothing else, I've learned about the doggedness to pursue a goal and to continue to argue for what you believe in has been invaluable.

Today the Clean Energy bills went through the House of Representatives, a great day for our country, and a special day for all of us who've sought real action on climate for so long.

I would say my first spoken contributions in the House, my first spoken contribution in the Labor Caucus and as a Cabinet Minister were on this issue. This debate has been part of my working life and my political life before coming into parliament.

I know that these strong beliefs and the values which underpin them are held by many in the community and in the parliament.

I celebrate with you the achievements in the House of Representatives today.

Nevertheless it remains a matter of constant regret, that so ratcheted up and tightly wound has been every aspect of recent political debate, something that probably wasn't shared with the same intensity in Mick Young's time, that many view all policy outcomes through a cynical lens.

Genuine action and achievement can be diminished in the current political environment.

I am not complaining, merely observing.

I have no doubt that in the future, the significance of this major environmental and economic reform will be properly recognised. Just as I know we recognise the achievements of Mick and the contributions he made.

### **Government initiatives**

Mick Young would be very proud that his party, the Australian Labor Party, has put education front and centre.

Mick Young travelled from the shearing shed to the Australian Parliament. A journey supported by his union and driven by his own capacity.

As was the case with many of his Labor contemporaries.

And it was a remarkable achievement.

But such achievements should never be left to chance or rely only on the abilities, capacity or inheritance of the individual.

Labor has always believed that Australia is diminished when its people do not achieve the successes of which they are capable because of poverty or disadvantage or background.

Despite his background and lack of formal education, Mick understood that education was the escape route out of personal hardship and economic circumstance.

He knew that one of the primary responsibilities of government is to maximise the education opportunities of all children and young people.

He knew that this was one of the tenets of Labor. A guiding philosophy that sits at the core of what we stand for.

He understood this because he grew up in a world where such opportunities were not distributed equally or fairly.

This government has placed education at the centre of its agenda – this is core business for Labor, and it goes further than schools.

We are also addressing the pre-school and early childhood sectors and vigorously expanding opportunities in trades training and skills and higher education.

This a reform agenda that covers the entire spectrum of education and training, through the learning journey and experiences of young Australians.

These are reforms that begin to take effect when children are infants and continue to provide expanded opportunity as they go through school and enter the world of work or further education.

And this is an integrated reform of the education system, where skills training can now occur in schools, typified by our Trade Training Centres.

In Port Adelaide, the electorate that Mick represented, the government has established Trades Training Centres at Seaton High and at Ocean View College. Among other courses students will be able to study electro-technology and civil construction.

There are two other TTCs under construction at Le Fevre High school and at the Islamic College of South Australia.

The total government investment in TTCs will be \$2.5 billion over a decade. A staggering sum. What opportunities for young Australians going into the school system to have access to these facilities in Mick's electorate.

These centres will deliver training to the next generation of young Australians.

The intention of these reforms is one of which I believe Mick Young would have approved.

They are reforms which recognise that the economy is undergoing profound and significant change.

We know there is a historic economic shift underway, the largest we've experienced in generations: growing Asian economies, a significant and substantial minerals boom and the emergence of instantaneous digital technologies and the web.

All mean that the economic landscape is experiencing great change.

And as is so often the case, when the focus is on working Australians, it falls to Labor to fashion and deliver the necessary response.

We can't just close our eyes, cross our fingers, put our heads in the sand and hope for the best with such changes washing across the economic landscape.

An arresting metaphor but not far from the contorted denialism of our political opponents

Australia's successful economic future is linked to technology, to having a growing and educated workforce, to clean energy industries, to innovation and creativity.

And this future, incidentally, can only be delivered by governments that understand that we can't move forward economically simply by squeezing workers rights.

We need to invest in doing things smarter and investing in skills, innovation and education.

Doing otherwise underestimates the capacity of Australian workers and betrays a deep pessimism about our ability as a nation to meet the challenges of climate change and a differing economic paradigm we inhabit.

It is the reflexive pessimism and negativity of our political opponents which most offends me and would, I think, offend the Labor warriors of the past.

Their work was built on optimism and hope.

And optimism and hope are natural partners when you are in the education portfolio and you have regular contact with children and young people.

We believe that to we need to seize the huge opportunities which come from

- the growth of Asia
- the resources boom
- a clean energy future and
- the National Broadband.

And maintain an economy driven by an education system where every person is able to achieve to their capacity and potential. We know that increasing opportunities for individuals will pay real national economic dividends.

So the opportunities provided by education and the future possibilities of our nation are intrinsically linked.

A recent Grattan Institute paper cites the following research outlining the importance of education to the economy.

If Australia were to match the PISA scores of Shanghai, China, in reading attainment, it would add an estimated \$90 billion to GDP by 2050 and make Australians 12% richer by the turn of the century.

The opportunities provided by education and the prosperity of our nation are inextricably linked.

The Australian Government is honouring Mick Young's life and legacy through our work to give every young Australian these opportunities.

Compared to 1970s and 80s, the days of Mick Young's ministerial career, we know so much more about the importance of the very early years in individual development.

We are making a massive investment in those early years because there is abundant scientific research that points to how critical the first years of a child's life are to the physical and mental wellbeing of their adult life and their level of educational success.

It is not clearly recognised but our commitment to a National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care, including for universal access to pre schools in the year before school, and the resources we have made available to support this, is a first ever endeavour by a national government ever in this country.

I recently launched a National Framework for School Age Child Care, which provides a strong evidence-based approach to encourage their physical, social and emotional development while in child care.

Whether children are in school or in other early childhood settings, they need to be immersed in activities and given opportunities that are beneficial to their development. We need a framework for that.

Pre schools and early childhood education settings prepare and support students and ease the path into formal compulsory education - schools.

Education research for over a decade has pointed to classroom teachers as the critical in-school variable, if students are to achieve success.

This year's education Budget was squarely directed at improving teaching and teacher quality with an investment of \$425 million dollars of new funding to recognise and reward teachers over the next 4 years. This is part of an election commitment of \$1.3 billion dedicated to this purpose.

The Rewards for Great Teachers initiative will recognise our exceptional teachers and reward them for their valuable work.

As TAFE Directors, I expect you might agree with me that the market for skills is evolving rapidly.

We can't afford to have people left behind because of poor literacy and numeracy skills.

The lack of these basic skills prevent employment and inhibit retraining. These are a potential workforce that cannot adapt to changes in the employment market.

This damages individuals but it also reduces the prosperity of Australian society and the productivity of the Australian economy.

Our reforms to schools are linked to the VET sector.

As you will know, the Council of Australian Governments set new goals to support young people into further education, training or employment.

The first goal is to have 90 per cent of all young people completing year 12 or an equivalent qualification by 2015.

The second is to get more Indigenous young people to complete year 12 or an equivalent qualification by 2020.

We are pursuing these goals through a \$723 million National Partnership with the States and Territories on Youth Attainment and Transitions.

Funding under this National Partnership enables states and territories to give young people access to multiple learning pathways, broader career development opportunities and, importantly, mentoring support.

I think that learning pathways are the key. Gone are the days when students were streamed into academic or non academic careers based on socio economic status or postcode rather than their interests or abilities.

The modern economy and its challenges will demand a flexible, nimble workforce.

We must give students a variety of opportunities to pursue various routes to their preferred careers.

The National Partnership also provides funding for the \$287 million Australian Government Youth Connections program to assist young people at risk of not finishing year 12 to get the support and skills they need to remain in, or return to education.

I am pleased to be able to report to you that in the first 18 months the Youth Connections program has provided over 32 500 young people with individualised support and successfully re-engaged over 14 800 young people with education or training.

A further 6470 young people have also been assisted to overcome barriers to their full engagement in education.

The program is also playing an important role in 'closing the gap' with over 18 per cent of program participants being Indigenous Australians.

Our \$183 million investment in the School Business Community Partnership Brokers program is also working, importantly, to improve community and business engagement with schools.

In the first 18 months, over 2100 partnerships were supported by the program involving over 9000 partner organisations with about one in six of these partnerships having an Indigenous focus.

I've gone into some detail to give you a sense of the scope of our programs across the spectrum of education and the level of commitment we are applying as a Government.

The fact is these are the sorts of programs that I'm certain Mick Young would have applauded.

We're also developing the National Trade Cadetships that will begin operating next year. And I am pleased to see Professor Bradley here tonight.

This will have two pathways.

The Foundation Pathway will focus on work readiness skills, laying the foundation for further training, while the Pre-Apprentice Pathway will focus on a specific trade or occupation area.

Structured work experience placements will be an integral part of the initiative.

By 2015, we are going to need an additional 2.4 million people in the workforce with qualifications at Certificate III or higher.

The National Trade Cadetship is part of the Government's response to this challenge.

Our intention is to make sure that when Australian students leave school, they possess the skills necessary to meet the work place demands that will be required in emerging industries.

There is an opportunity to develop this in the National Curriculum, so as to provide for greater consistency in the delivery of vocational training in schools across Australia, and a clearly defined pathway through school and into further study, work or a career in the trades.

The panel that Denise is heading, consisting of leading education and training experts will advise the Government on the best ways to ensure that students who want to pursue a vocation or trade are offered high-quality, nationally consistent learning pathways in schools.

The improvements we are making to VET in Schools are consistent with our agenda for the broader VET system.

Many of you will have heard Minister Evans speak at the TDA National Conference last month, so you will know about our plans to reform the national training system. In a nutshell, as endorsed by COAG last month, the Government is working with the states and territories to:

- renegotiate the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development, and
- introduce a new, five-year \$1.75 billion National Partnership Agreement focused on VET reform.

The focus is on gearing up our training system so that it can respond to the challenges that we face for our national economy – better quality, transparency, efficiency and equity.

Minister Evans spoke to the concerns that some people have about the impact of the reforms on TAFE.

I am not proposing to re-visit those here but I will note the Government's objective is for a world-class VET system where Australians are able to choose high quality, accessible and relevant training delivered by qualified teachers in institutions with modern supporting infrastructure.

We know that TAFE already delivers for hundreds of thousands of Australians every year—people from all walks of life, with different goals and needs, in locations as diverse as you can imagine.

There is no doubt in my mind that TAFE will be front and centre of responding to the skills and workforce challenges that are ahead for this country.

## **Conclusion**

These are the range of concrete action and policies we are delivering to achieve our goals commitments and our vision, a vision shared with Mick Young, to bring equality of educational opportunity to people who might be vulnerable or disadvantaged.

It's inspiring to me to know how the work of the Mick Young Scholarship Trust continues to transform young lives.

I am thinking of one particular example.

Christina Ngawhika, a scholarship recipient and mother of seven summed up what it means when she said: 'the Mick Young Scholarship Trust continues to be a form of hope and inspiration for Australians wanting a better life through education'.

Then there's Jennifer who has loved drawing since she was a child, but has not lived with her parents since she was 13 years old and has moved house frequently.

She attempted year 12 twice, but her personal circumstances meant she was unsuccessful.

She had to support herself while she studied and now has graduated with a Certificate IV in Design.

Her teacher has said she is a fantastic student, and she won an award for her design folio.

The scholarship funds that she gets from the Mick Young Scholarship Trust mean she can pay for the materials required for her studies.

In ways such as these, the Mick Young Scholarship Trust has been doing magnificent work in helping thousands of Australians to receive a helping hand where and when it matters most.

As an Ambassador for the Trust, I am extremely proud to be associated with this organisation and I am honoured to speak tonight.

The long-term benefits of the Trust's actions are extraordinary.

Many hundreds of people are now leading active and productive lives in our community as a result of this support.

They are contributing as employees, employers, business owners and teachers and in many other positive and beneficial ways.

One of the important ways in which the Mick Young Trust is evolving is the way it is becoming enmeshed with the key industry sectors where people are developing skills for the future.

I am very pleased to learn of the close collaboration that is occurring between the Scholarship Trust and the Transport & Logistics Industry Skills Council.

This will develop a formal arrangement that will help to assist students at a number of TAFE colleges around Australia.

I would like to congratulate the Transport & Logistics Industry Skills Council for their foresight in extending opportunities for those entering this sector, and to the Mick Young Trust for seeking new ways of helping those who will make a contribution to the economy and the community.

So, thank you to everyone here for continuing to support the work of the Mick Young Scholarship Trust. It has been my great privilege to give this oration in 2011.

Mick himself said that 'Education is a right, not a privilege' and that it was vital 'to break the cycle of unemployment and disadvantage that can restrict a person's potential'.

We honour his life through the work of the Trust.

Mick's legacy to the nation then, is the way the many scholarship recipients have had their lives transformed in his memory.

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