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Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

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Australia

**Speech of Mrs Jennifer Ledger
Head of the Australian official delegation
Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs**

Issues in Higher Education: An Australian perspective

Your Excellencies, Colleagues and Friends, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak today and share with you views on some important issues in higher education facing Australia.

The Australian Government has laid the basis for a 20 year perspective on the development of Australian universities. The Government's principal objectives are to further increase access to education and training, to improve the quality and responsiveness of institutions and courses and to expand the opportunities for lifelong learning.

On Monday Mr Pataki emphasized the important theme of quality of teaching and I would like to echo that sentiment.

Undergraduates are the life blood of universities, without them a university would cease to function. Teaching is a core function of universities and arguably it is now time for a new focus on the primacy of undergraduate education.

Of course, we are not seeking to downgrade the central and complementary role that research has in the higher education sector. But we are aware that teaching can too easily lose status to research. History shows us that the quality of university output has too frequently tended to be measured in terms of research rather than teaching.

Teaching quality is harder to measure and may currently be less prestigious than research, but this does not mean it can be left to take care of itself.

In Australia, the government has put in place measures to promote teaching quality:

- a Committee has been set up to provide universities with practical advice to improve the quality of teaching; and
- annual Awards are provided to give public recognition to outstanding teachers who perhaps otherwise have few opportunities to take the limelight they deserve.

The demonstration of quality is a major challenge for all countries, and has become even more important with the massification of higher education. And Australia takes very seriously the need for the universities to demonstrate the quality of what they provide to the wider community. In addition to the publication of sector wide performance indicators, and the accreditation procedures of the professions, our universities provide quality improvement plans as part of the annual discussions with government. These plans set out the goals, strategies and performance of each university. They will be published together with an overview of the sector.

The higher education system in Australia has been transformed over the past decade. New universities have been created from former Colleges of Advanced Education, while amalgamations have occurred between some institutions. Through the opening up of new campuses and study centres universities have been at the forefront of servicing the needs of communities in regional areas.

The number of students has grown from 394,000 in 1987 to 660,000 in 1997. Curricula have been redesigned with cross-discipline courses gaining in importance as have post-graduate studies, particularly coursework studies. The decade also saw a great expansion in the number of overseas students studying at Australian higher education institutions: in 1987 there were 17,000 overseas students, by 1997 there were 63,000. Australia continues to welcome overseas students.

The Australian post-secondary education system has become essentially a universal lifelong system with about 80-90 per cent of today's teenagers expected to enter post-secondary education at some stage during their lives. The figure for higher education is around 40 per cent.

Expanded access is bringing many benefits to the students involved and to Australia generally, but it brings with it new challenges.

The larger number of students means that universities are dealing with a more diverse student body, who are, in response to economic and social change, imposing new demands on the universities.

Against this background, it is encouraging to see that the participation rates of some of the equity groups (women in non-traditional areas and indigenous Australians) have risen over the period 1991-1997. However we are still facing some challenges as the participation of people from rural and isolated areas and low socio-economic status background in higher education has failed to increase more than proportionately. These groups are maintaining their share but have not improved their relative position. In addition more women are required in post-graduate and doctoral studies which will lead on to academic careers where we are still under-represented.

With regard to the relationship between the participation rate and the success and retention rates of equity group members, our data show that once members of equity groups are in the university system they can in general, with appropriate support, achieve outcomes at least equal to those of the rest of the student body. However, there are some concerns. Indigenous students have success and retention rates only about 75 per cent of those for the rest of the student body. Also students from isolated areas have a lower retention rate than other students. The underlying causes for this are complex and pose challenges ahead.

At a recent conference on indigenous education organized by the Australian Federation of University Women, tokenism, paternalism, discrimination and isolation from the community were identified as some of the main problems to be overcome. Some solutions might be emphasizing the importance of diversity; developing distance learning; developing supported tutorial systems; and a "both ways" approach - retaining connections with traditional culture while going ahead in education.

As the size of the sector grows, higher education comes increasingly to the attention of more people. They have an interest both as consumers of higher education services and as taxpayers as to how efficiently and effectively public funds are spent.

The relationship of higher education to government also becomes more important given the large amount of funds involved but also as higher education is viewed as a major driver in reshaping the economy. The skills provided through higher education to the workforce are increasingly seen as one of the prime means to improve international competitiveness and raise standards of living.

The Australian higher education sector has displayed considerable flexibility in the delivery of courses - many institutions are leading edge appliers of information technology particularly to their distance education courses. New courses have emerged in response to the changing needs of students who seek to gain employment and maintain their skills base.

Public accountability is a major international concern as all countries face the need to ensure quality in their respective higher education systems.

This growing desire for increased accountability is also fuelled by the events outside higher education including the need to ensure cost effective and efficient use of government funds. Associated with this are growing calls on government finances from other sectors such as health and welfare.

Australia's higher education system has always been financed from both public and private sectors although there has never been a consensus on the appropriate balance between public and private financing of higher education. Australia has developed an equitable and efficient way to increase participation in higher education through increased private contributions to study. The Australian Higher Education Contribution Scheme gives students the ability to defer the payment of their contribution until their salary reaches a reasonable level. The absence of a real interest rate on the deferred amount,

removes the disincentive to participate for those without the current financial resources to undertake study. The provision of full fee paying places in addition to publicly funded places expands the numbers of students participating in the sector.

The Australian model for financing higher education is worthy of consideration by other countries facing financing pressure and who seek to maintain equity of access to higher education for their citizens.

Australia seeks to provide wider opportunities and choice for people to obtain the best quality education and training they need, when they need it, and in ways and at places and times that best suit their particular circumstances.

The challenge for the next decade is the transition from mass to near-universal tertiary education. This challenge, to establish a lifelong learning culture and invest more deeply in people represents the equivalent for the twenty-first century of the achievement of universal secondary education in the twentieth century. Such an achievement is worth pursuing vigorously and creatively, as it would strengthen the foundations for a democratic society and for the continuing renewal of knowledge and skills.

This Conference enables countries to continue to collaborate and build on earlier work including the recent Melbourne conference which attracted delegates from over 60 countries who took the opportunity to discuss the implications of the Delors Report, Education for the Twenty-first century, in the Asia-Pacific region. Another example of collaboration is the Joint Work Plan for 1999-2005 agreed last week by the Six Inter-governmental Committees, in charge of the Application of the Convention on the Recognition of Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education, which we are recommending to this conference for endorsement. In this context the Asia-Pacific Committee will take forward its own specific workplan.

In summary, Australia seeks to ensure that education and training is both appropriate and effective; that it responds to contemporary realities and the changing environment and delivers the learning outcomes we expect of it. We have a strong and vibrant multicultural society and this is one of our advantages in meeting the challenges that lie ahead. We must increase efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public funds, but without doubt, the future of the higher education sector depends on its ability to provide the highest quality service to all our students no matter what their age or background and to the wider community that universities all serve.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important conference.