

## **EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA**

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**Abstract: School-based adoption of Multimedia: An Australian Perspective.**

**This paper will look first at the work of Young Media Australia – a national community-based, information, research, training and advocacy organization working in the field of children, young people and mass media.**

**The adoption rate of multi-media, including information technologies, in school systems across Australia will then be examined.**

**Issues relating to the use of school-based multimedia, including the internet, will also be identified.**

Education and training in Australia can be thought of as a continuous medium which is delivered in four sectors – pre-school education; compulsory and post-compulsory schooling; vocational education and training; and higher education (the latter two of the four sectors being known collectively as the tertiary sector) – supported by an infrastructure for State and national coordination, planning and policy formulation.

The term 'education' has traditionally been used to denote the processes of obtaining knowledge, attitudes, skills or socially valued qualities of character and behaviour. Education is regarded as a lifelong process, initiated at birth, developed in schooling and subsequent formal pathways of learning, and continued thereafter. Training is a more specific type of learning, whereby certain skills are developed to a standard of proficiency for subsequent application in the workplace. The value of training lies in its practical relevance.

Historically, the large part of education has usually been conducted in formal institutions, while training took place at the workplace (or 'on-the-job'). Over time, on-the-job training was found to be incomplete without some additional formal instruction. This led to the evolution of a separate training sector focusing primarily on the development of specific work-related skills.

While education may be regarded as 'people oriented' and training 'skill oriented', the distinction between education and training is not clear-cut. Moreover, in recent times the boundaries between the two have become less clearly delineated. Reforms and initiatives in the latter part of the twentieth century have seen

education extend even further beyond formal institutions, and training beyond the workplace. Education and training are now both perceived as parts of a lifelong learning process that enables individuals to take their places in a skilled and changing labour force, to lead fulfilling personal lives and to become active members of the community.

### **Commonwealth and State Government Responsibilities in Education**

The governments of the six Australian States and the two Territories have the major responsibility for education, including the administration and substantial funding of primary, secondary and technical and further education (TAFE). The Commonwealth Government also plays a significant role in education policy, programs and funding. Total government expenditure on education in 1994-95 was \$23 billion, which represented 5.6% of the Gross Domestic Product.

The State governments administer their own systems of primary, secondary and technical and further education through government departments and agencies responsible to State Ministers.

The Commonwealth Government has direct responsibility for education in Australian territories [Norfolk Island, Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling), Islands] under the Minister for the Environment, Sport and Territories. The Commonwealth Government also has special responsibilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and for migrants, as well as the power to provide financial assistance for students.

Moreover; the Commonwealth Government is responsible for international relations in education. The education responsibilities entail grants to schools; student assistance; overseas students; awards and exchanges; tertiary education; language policy; educational research and statistics; publications; education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; multicultural education; Asian and women's studies; and education and the arts.

The Australian Constitution empowers the Commonwealth Government to make grants to the States and to place conditions upon such grants. The Commonwealth Government is principally responsible for the funding of higher education institutions, and provides supplementary funding for schools and for technical and further education. Apart from its significant financial role, the Commonwealth is involved in promoting national consistency and coherence in the provision of education across Australia.

### **Preschool Education**

All States and Territories have a policy of making preschool education available universally for children in the years prior to school entry. A majority of the States



and Territories have made considerable progress towards this goal. Most preschools are conducted on a sessional basis (i.e., sessions of two to three hours for two to five days per week). Preschool programs generally favour the free play approach with emphasis on children's social and emotional development through creative activities. Parents often contribute by assisting at some sessions or by the purchase of play materials and educational resources. Attendance fees are not usually charged in those states where preschools are government-run, but in others fees may be payable to private or voluntary organisations.

## **Primary and Secondary Education**

### *School Attendance*

School attendance is compulsory throughout Australia between the ages of 6 and 15 years (16 years in Tasmania).

Each State or Territory has its own specific requirements. Most children commence primary school at about five years of age. Primary schooling generally begins with a preparatory or kindergarten year, followed by 12 grades to complete a full secondary course of study. While the final two years of schooling generally fall outside the compulsory stage of education, in 1995 83% of students remained at school until year 11 and 72% remained until year 12.

### *School Organisation and Operation*

Primary schooling provides a general elementary program lasting for seven or eight years until year 6 or 7. Students enter secondary schools at year 7 in some State systems and at year 8 in others. Secondary education is generally comprehensive and coeducational. Most students attend schools reasonably near to their homes. Usually primary and secondary schools are separate institutions, but in some country areas there are area or central schools which provide both levels of schooling. Non-government schools follow a similar pattern, but a significant, though declining proportion are single sex institutions. In Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, attendance for the final two years of government schooling is at separate secondary colleges.

Generally, schools in Australia have a considerable degree of autonomy, most State departments have established regional administrations which are responsible for matters such as planning school buildings and deploying staff while a central curriculum unit provides general guidelines on course planning. In general, individual schools determine teaching and learning approaches within the guidelines and offer options within resources available and the attitudes and interests of students. Some systems encourage school-based curriculum



development and, in the case of Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, school-based assessment in place of external examinations. In Victoria a combination of school-based assessment and external exams culminate in the Victorian Certificate of Education. While schools usually have a parents' association, there has been encouragement of greater community participation in general decision-making at school level in some systems through parent representation on school councils and boards.

### **Curriculum Development**

Curriculum development in Australia is the responsibility of the State and Territory governments. The Commonwealth Government plays an important role in promoting equity and social justice policies in the delivery of education, and encouraging national collaboration on school curriculum matters. Since 1988, the Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for Education have been working together on school curriculum issues.

As part of the agreed National Goals for Schooling, the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs approved eight key learning areas: English, mathematics, science, technology, studies of society and the environment, the arts, health and physical development, and languages other than English. Between 1989 and 1993 the Commonwealth and States embarked on the development of curriculum statements and profiles in each of the key learning areas.

There has been widescale adoption of the national curriculum statements and profiles, or variations of them. Almost all States and Territories are using the statements and profiles as a basis for their curriculum development at both primary and secondary levels, but are incorporating variations which reflect local policies and priorities.

The statements provide a framework for curriculum development in each area of learning. The curriculum profiles are designed to assist in the improvement of teaching and learning in schools by working on the principle that good assessment focuses on what is valued and also provides a framework for reporting on a student's progress and achievements in each of the learning areas. They outline what students should learn in each learning area and to what level of complexity. Interwoven through them are a number of cross-curricula perspectives as well as principles of inclusivity, ensuring that the profiles use gender inclusive language and that the knowledge, skills and understanding identified are inclusive of the knowledge, experiences and interests of women and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## **Primary Schooling**

In primary education, the main emphasis is on the development of basic language and literacy skills, simple arithmetic, moral and social education, health training and some creative activities.

In the upper primary years there is development of the skills learned in the earlier years. English, mathematics, social studies, science, music, art and craft, physical education and health are studied. There are also optional subjects such as religious instruction and, in some schools, foreign and community languages, and instrumental music.

Students in Australian primary schools usually have only one teacher for all subjects, and are promoted each year on the basis of completing the previous year, rather than on achievement. In schools where open plan learning styles have been adopted, the method of team teaching (more than one teacher to a class) and multi-age grouping of students is occasionally practised.

## **Secondary Schooling**

In secondary education, in some systems, the first one or two years of secondary school consist of a general program which is followed by all students, although there may be some electives. In later years, a basic core of subjects is retained with students being able to select additional optional subjects. In other systems, students select options from the beginning of secondary school.

The core subjects in all systems involved the eight key learning areas. Optional subjects may include, for example, a foreign language, a further humanities or social science subject, commerce, art, crafts, music, home economics, a manual arts subjects, agriculture, physical education or health education. Some schools offer optional courses in subjects such as consumer education, conversational foreign languages, word processing, commerce studies, driver education, dram and leisure-time activities.

In senior secondary years, a wider range of options is available in the larger schools and there is an increasing tend towards encouraging individual schools to develop courses suited to the needs and interests of their students, subject to accreditation and moderation procedures.

Students in Australian secondary schools generally have a different teacher for each separate subject areas, though, like primary schools, variations may occur where open-plan or more flexible methods have been adopted. Promotion is, again, generally chronological, but students may be grouped according to ability after an initial period in unstreamed classes.



Post-compulsory schooling in Australia is undergoing considerable change, with an increasing emphasis on the incorporation of vocational programs into the senior secondary curriculum. Under the Australian Vocational Training System, students at school may obtain vocational education and training sector certificates as part of their senior study and undertake some parts of their programs in the workplace.

Examinations and assessment at each level are carried out by individual schools except year 12 in those systems which have retained external examinations at year 12 level. Students attaining the minimum school leaving age may leave school and seek employment, or enrol in a vocational course in a TAFE institution or a private business college, or many TAFE courses, completion of year 10 of secondary school is a minimum entry requirement. For those continuing to the end of secondary school (year 12), opportunities for further study are available in TAFE institutions, higher education institutions and other post-school institutions.

Students' eligibility for entry to higher education institutions is assessed during, or at the end of, the final two years of secondary schooling. Five States and the Northern Territory use different combinations of school assessment and public examinations. In Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, eligibility to enter higher education is determined from moderated and standardised school assessments. Several education systems are currently reviewing their senior secondary school assessment procedures.