

# Discovering that the world is really flat! A reflection on the past, present and future of the World Education Fellowship

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The early years of the World Education Fellowship (WEF) in Australia were very much on my mind in July and August when I conducted a series of workshops around the nation for the Australian College of Educators. A total of 19 were held in the capital cities and at least one regional centre in each state and territory. The theme was 'Re-imagining Educational Leadership', the title of my recent book (Caldwell, 2006).

I recalled the extraordinary public meetings in 1937 as the New Education Fellowship (NEF) got off the ground in Australia, with 21 international speakers addressing about 9,000 people in capital cities around the country (2,302 in Melbourne alone). An initiator of these events, founding director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, Dr Ken Cunningham, wrote that 'there is not the slightest doubt that the Conference has succeeded in one of its chief objectives—namely, of stirring public interest in educational problems' (cited by Philips, 1985, p. 217) [see also Sandell (1995) for the history of WEF in Australia and a detailed account of the 1937 conference].

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on what has transpired over 70 years since these remarkable meetings. It appears that WEF in Australia is now either 'in recess' or struggling for membership and a public profile. This is the last issue of *New Horizons in Education* and, if the international website is accurate, the last issue of the founding journal of NEF (*New Era in Education*) appeared in 2003 after more-or-less continuous publication since NEF was established in 1921.

These brief reflections are concerned with the following questions. How do we acquire knowledge of developments in education in other countries? Is there a place for journals such as *New Horizons in Education* and *New Era in Education*? Does WEF have a role to play in either its current form or in a re-invented association? What is the relationship between that role and UNESCO, given that WEF has the status of a non-government organisation affiliated with UNESCO? What has transpired in Australia in respect to the issues raised by presenters at the conference in 1937?

In 1937, apart from academic publications available to a few, knowledge about developments in education in other countries was brought to the public and the profession in Australia in the face-to-face meetings described above. The contributions of visiting experts are now a regular occurrence through keynote presentations at annual conferences of professional associations formed since 1937. Workshop tours of high profile academics are conducted regularly. In 2006 alone, such events have been held or are scheduled by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), with Professor Michael Fullan (Canada) and Professor Andy Hargreaves (USA), and International Networking for Educational Transformation (iNet), with Professor David Hargreaves (England).

Face-to-face meetings, conferences and workshops may be the best way to meet and interact, but the demands on the profession in 2006 are such that periodicals and the internet are the preferred modes of acquiring information for those who make the time to learn about what is occurring elsewhere. The peak professional associations have up-to-date websites that frequently include information about developments around Australia and other countries. Online conferences are sophisticated, with those conducted over the last 18 months for iNet (Global) on the theme of personalising learning linking thousands of teachers and their leaders, as well as many students, from scores of countries, including Australia.

These developments reflect the fact that the profession now works in a world that is flat. Writing in a book with that title, *The World is Flat*, triple Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Thomas Friedman described ten forces—‘the flatteners’—that converged over the last 15 years: ‘The net result of this convergence was the creation of a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration—the sharing of knowledge and work—in real time, without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language [that] is open today to more people in more places on more days in more ways than anything like it ever before in the history of the world’ (Friedman, 2005, pp. 176-177).

This describes one of three convergences that account for the flattening of the world. The second is that there is stronger alignment between the capacities of an enterprise and the potential that is available as a result of the first convergence. The third is that the flatteners are now at work and alignment has occurred in parts of the world that were previously ‘frozen out’.

It is unlikely that WEF can make more than a minimal contribution in the years ahead if it continues to ‘go it alone’. It can, however, follow the lead of other professional associations and participate in networks of associations or form partnerships in the organisation of events or sharing of information. Partnerships call for contributions from each party, so it will be necessary to identify what members of WEF can ‘bring to the table’ other than memories of exhilarating times in its early years, an honourable history, and warm friendships among those who have kept the flame alight.

The way forward might lie in synergies with UNESCO. The Education Network of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO has 17 members that include some of Australia’s most eminent educators, including several who are heading or have headed school systems and other enterprises in education in Australia and other countries, as well as the current chair and immediate past chair of WEF (Australia). The network has important work to do through its links with government and the contributions it makes to international meetings of UNESCO. However, it has a relatively low profile with members of the profession. In most instances its members have heavy responsibilities in their regular jobs, but one way to raise its profile would be to work in partnership with a re-focused WEF and other professional associations and networks to bring to life in Australia the mission of UNESCO to ‘promote education as a fundamental right; improve the quality of education; and stimulate experimentation, innovation and policy dialogue’ (UNESCO, 2006).

Journals such as *New Era in Education* and *New Horizons in Education*, as well as the international conferences of WEF held every two years, deal with issues that are closely connected to the first two parts of this mission. The recently concluded international conference in Sofia, Bulgaria was sharply focused on the third with its theme of ‘Education for Full Humanity: Education in a Technological Society’. It may be that the focus of a potential partnership of UNESCO and WEF in Australia should be one of unrelenting attention to ‘experimentation, innovation and policy dialogue’.

The case for such a focus is strong if one recalls some of the international contributions at the 1937 conference. Many of the speakers were critical of what they had seen in Australian education. I. L. Kandel of Teachers College at Columbia University was 'strongly critical of the centralisation of educational administration, the lack of public support for education, the emphasis on examinations, the small amount of time Inspectors gave to helping teachers and the conformity of teachers to standards set by their education departments'. Another speaker, F. W. Hart of the University of California referred to 'the complete and universal absence of a feeling of ownership or control of the schools by the people' (the aforementioned statements are all drawn from Phillips, 1985, p. 217). Many observers might argue that these criticisms still apply.

In summary, my reflections have led to a conclusion that a re-invigorated WEF in Australia has an important role to play in partnership with UNESCO, with a focus on experimentation, innovation and policy dialogue, and networking with other professional associations in the process. There should be two interacting spheres of interest—national and international—with a limited number of carefully targeted activities, including face-to-face and online forums and publications. The need will be as great in 2007 as it was in 1937.

## References

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