

*This document, BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE HAVES AND THE HAVE-NOTS: REPORT OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT FORUM (NEEF), is the outcome of a unique project which brought together a large cross section of the Australian community who wished to develop actions to address some of the key problems of disadvantaged groups in Australia.*

The National Education and Employment Forum (NEEF) is a project of the World Education Fellowship (WEF) Australia. WEF is an international, not-for-profit, volunteer organisation with no political or religious affiliation. WEF is headquartered in London, and has consultative status with UNESCO. It is not a welfare agency. The Guiding Committee of WEF International endorsed the NEEF project and its Chair opened the National Forum.

NEEF had its genesis at the Annual General Meeting of the Australian Council of the World Education Fellowship (WEF) in January 2000. Some of its members had perceived that education had a role to play in bridging the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' in the Australian community. They acknowledged that the Australian economy had done comparatively well in the transformation of economic activity in the 1990s, characterised by globalisation and the emergence of the 'new economy' based on information communication and technology. But WEF members perceived that there was mounting evidence that some parts of the Australian community were being left behind. The challenge was to ensure that those not doing so well did not fall further behind. The fear was that inaction might result in a permanent underclass of disadvantaged in a chronically divided society. A major part of the solution was perceived to be the ability of education to transform the personal and social fortunes of people who are disadvantaged. And so NEEF was born.

NEEF consisted of Forums in five States, (in Brisbane, 7 October 2000, Adelaide 3 March, 2001, Melbourne, 4 May, 2001, Sydney, 12 July and Perth, 16-17 July, 2001) followed by a National Forum in Brisbane on 16-17 August, 2001. Participants were a diverse group of prominent Australians, business people, public administrators, educators including principals, teachers and students from government and non-government schools, lectures from TAFE and academia, welfare executives and workers, Indigenous Australians, people from ethnic communities and politicians from the major political parties. The NEEF

Project looked closely at the progress being made in Australia to provide the necessary interpersonal supports, infrastructure, networks, hardware/software, maintenance, and flexibly delivered curriculum initiatives, at all levels of education/training, to ensure that all Australians have the confidence, skills and knowledge to enable them to access an appropriate education, so that they may, more actively, participate in, and contribute to the emerging social and economic structures of this country.

The range of individuals and organisations that became involved in NEEF included:

- the immediate past and the present Governors-General;
- politicians from the main political parties;
- state Government Departments and agencies;
- federal government agencies such as Area Consultative Committees, the Australian National Training Authority and the ECEF;
- international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and WEF International;
- welfare groups such as the Australian Council of Social Services, the State Councils of Social Services, Anglicare, Mission Australia, Brotherhood of St. Laurence and the Smith Family;
- the business community through bodies such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Commerce Queensland, Rotary and companies such as IBM, Telstra, Cisco Systems and Boeing;
- the Indigenous community;
- universities, TAFEs, secondary, primary and pre-schools;
- The Queensland Catholic Education Commission;
- Adventist, Catholic and Lutheran Education Departments in a number of States;

- Research groups such as the Australian College of Education and The Dusseldorp Skills Forum;
- Training Associations; and
- Students from government and non-government schools who attended and spoke at the Forums.

NEEF is unique in the breadth of the constituencies that have become partners in the project. That they came together is a graphic illustration of the reality expressed by the polls which regularly and consistently place education as one of the top two areas of concern of the Australian community.

This document is an urgent call for more and different things to be done. But three important clarifications are required. The first is that in making this call the participants in NEEF do not wish to de-value the large number of good things being done by dedicated teachers in schools, colleges and organisations across Australia. Their commitment to education is one of the defining characteristics of the nation. Senator Ian McDonald, Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government and the Hon. Anna Bligh MP, Minister for Education in Queensland illustrated some impressive initiatives being pursued at Federal and State levels. Examples of good practice will be referred to in this document. The NEEF proposals, however, are that even more should be done and that dedicated teachers and educational administrators should be empowered and supported by the Australian community, through its political representatives at State/Territory and Federal level, and in partnerships with their local communities and business, to achieve the goals set out in this document.

The second is that this document does not pretend to address all facets of education in Australia. It is primarily focussed on the actions that need to be taken to assist those most disadvantaged in the community. Its recommendations are not exhaustive or exclusive of other key initiatives in education such as the provision of greater opportunities for gifted students.

The third is that education alone will not be enough. An integrated set of actions based on employment and industry

policy, especially to create more employment, on welfare and family policy and community development policy is required, where all relevant agencies of government at both State/Territory, Federal and Local levels, co-operate to achieve desired goals. Recognising that, this document confines itself mainly to the role that educational initiatives should play, but gives attention to the need to integrate welfare support and make it more accessible to those in need and to link it more effectively with schools.

A comment about the nature of this Report which some readers may find unusual. It attempts to reflect the concerns and proposals of the participants in the NEEF State and National Forums, but it also attempts to link these concerns with a range of major Reports at National, State and Territory levels, with research, statistics and expert comment that reflect and illustrate the NEEF concerns. In doing so it aims for mutual reinforcement of this common body of proposals which charts a direction for the nation.

This Report is a call for action. It asks for the exercise of political will at Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local levels, to put into practice the recommendations of this and the significant Reports that have preceded it. As Gregor Ramsey noted in his Report on the Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales, titled *Quality Matters*, there have been more than 20 reviews of teaching and teacher education in the last two decades and that these had had "limited impact". We submit that what is needed now is a determined program of implementation, not further reports and trial programs that do not last. The point was put eloquently by an Indigenous woman at the National Forum:

"Stop reporting and doing reports on Indigenous education. What we need to start to do is look at those reports and start working on them. As you can see there's lots and lots of reports that have been done on Indigenous Education and I know with myself I'm tired of getting consulted and researched and poked and prodded and asked why." (Sue Thompson, 2001)

A summary of the main proposals of this Report with accompanying brief explanations was distributed to each Federal parliamentarian before the election in November, 2001. It is attached as Appendix 1.