

# Schools in test of relevance

By Dr Alec O'Connell FACE FAIM FNAAUC,  
Headmaster, Scotch College

***'Schools are designed on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly successions; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets. An individual with a schooled mind conceives of the world as a pyramid of classified packages accessible only to those who carry the proper tags.' – Illich 1971***

In Ivan Illich's seminal, and for many, somewhat controversial 1971 book, "Deschooling Society", he challenges the structure and purpose of schools asking us to consider why we struggle to reimagine our schools. He argues that "the public is indoctrinated to believe that skills are valuable and reliable only if they are the result of formal schooling". Some 47 years later, after copious volumes of educational reviews, curriculum changes and silver bullet fads to solve numeracy and literacy, the underlying organisational structures of schools have in fact changed very little.

Schools are still left having to jump through the same Year 12 hoop restrictions in pursuit of an ATAR or something similar to get the 30 per cent of those students who choose university to their end point. What about the other 70 per cent and the relevance of their schooling experience? For many young people, schools may well be a centre of disengagement, rather than a place

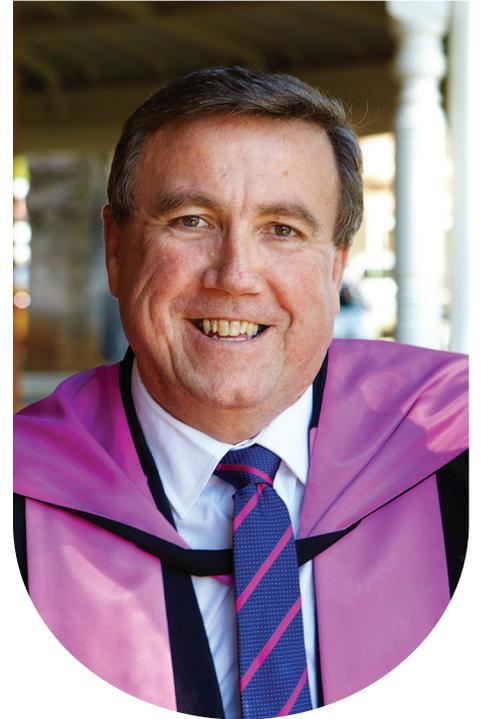
of meaningful learning experiences. Ted Dintersmith in his book 'What School Could Be', argues that "today the purpose of US education is to rank human potential, not develop it".

The business sector and other non-educational trained commentators purport to know the skills and attributes that students require, and hence, what schools should deliver. Ironically, some of the people who provide their assertoric words of advice are the ones who when their alma mater or the schools their own children attend, try to change, are the very first to queue up at the principal's office to complain about any innovation. Why? Because they all went to school, and cannot visualise it looking any different to when they were there. In other words, 'it served me so why change'? I wonder if they would feel the same about their hospitals if they looked like they did during the industrial age?

More than any other time in the history of education, students have open access to resources and information outside the domain of the traditional school or teacher. If schools are to meet the rapidly changing world and the needs of employers, then we have to reassess how schools can continue to stay relevant. The need for greater focus on meaningful enterprise educational opportunities has never been more important.

The reality is that 70 per cent of young people are currently entering the workforce in jobs that will be radically affected by automation, while 40 per cent of the current jobs won't even exist due to automation.

Don't get me wrong, schools are about educating, not simply training or just imparting generic capabilities. Content is still important. Engineers must achieve a certain level mathematical competency. I for one do not want to drive across a bridge



Dr Alec O'Connell FACE FAIM FNAAUC

designed by a someone who has great communication and EQ skills but incorrectly calculated the weight-loading parameters of a bridge.

The ongoing challenge is that schools have remained land-locked with so much content and expectations from systems and authorities to which they must report. It feels that this is only increasing, not decreasing. In essence, the curriculum has only been given token space to address such skills as general capabilities or approaches to learning. Unfortunately, if a particular skill or content does not appear in a topic test or end of year exam, then parents and students deem it to be not worth focusing upon.

The International Baccalaureate's approach to learning skills such as communication, thinking, self-management, research and social skills are central to a student's journey. None of these are taught at the expense of content.

I am not proposing we do not need schools, in fact the absolute contrary given the demise and moral unravelling of many of our so-called stable societal institutions. More than ever schools will need to be a cornerstone of society, a place of learning, a place of service, a place of socialisation, and a place of worship and spiritual guidance.

As someone once said, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different outcomes. The original industrial school system was designed to produce employees who could participate in the industrial model of mass production; those days are long gone. Schools need to be freed up to deliver programs that ensure all students are given the chance to become meaningful participants in a rapidly changing workplace, both locally and globally.