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New Ministry

Senator Scott Ryan has replaced Luke Hartsukyer as the Minister for Vocational Education and Skills in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s new ministry. Click here to read more...

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Top Class Sound and Top Dance 2016

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Federal parliamentary sitting dates can be found on the Parliament of Australia website. Victorian parliamentary sitting dates can be found on the Victorian Parliament website.

Please visit the Independent Schools Victoria website for seminars for February 2016.

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Australian Government Revokes Funding to School

The Australian Government Department of Education and Training has revoked millions of dollars in funding from a New South Wales Independent school after the school was unable to address ‘significant concerns about their financial management and governance arrangements raised during [a] formal compliance review of their operations’.

The school is one of six schools affiliated with the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) that were audited in 2015 over concerns that they were not complying with the ‘fundamental governance, financial and accountability requirements of the Australian Education Act 2013’.

Funding to the school will cease from Friday 8 April 2016, unless a review of the decision favours the school. The Australian Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, said that the decision was not taken lightly, but that:

after carefully considering the response to the issues raised in the compliance notice, my department had to make the difficult decision to revoke the funding approval … The Act requires, amongst other obligations, that all school authorities operate not-for-profit, be a ‘fit and proper person’ and ensure that funding provided is used only for school education.

The ABC reported that Mohammad Berjaoui, vice president of AFIC in the Australian Capital Territory, said:

Probably the management, it has not been done to the satisfaction of the Commonwealth, we’ll look into it … But, believe me, there is no embezzlement, there is no money paid for favours, the money which [the] school gets, it goes into education.

The Independent Education Union (IEU) expressed concern about the futures of the staff and students at the school. John Quessy, Secretary of the IEU in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, said that the union was focussing on ‘the employment and welfare of our members, who make up the staff of the school. The IEU is seeking clarification about their security of employment’.

− Funding to Malek Fahd Islamic School axed over concerns about financial management. ABC Online News, 9 February 2016
− Islamic school Malek Fahd has $15m in funding taken away. Leo Shanahan, The Australian, 9 February 2016
− Students fear Islamic college closure. Leo Shanahan, The Australian, 10 February 2016
− Islamic school ‘misused millions’. Leo Shanahan, The Australian, 11 February 2016

Youth at Risk of Radicalisation

The Australian Government is developing initiatives that will provide school staff with ‘awareness training and clear referral pathways to seek help in responding to concerning student behaviour’.

The Australian Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, and Minister for Justice, Michael Keenan, said that the initiatives would help teachers, students and parents ‘receive more support to recognise the warning signs of radicalisation and provide appropriate support to at-risk youth in their school communities’.

The new schools initiative will include three key support measures:

- awareness training for relevant school staff on radicalisation to violent extremism
- classroom resources to bolster students’ resilience to violent extremist influences
- processes to help school communities and parents receive and share information on the issue.

Minister Birmingham said that the government works with the states and territories to provide local community youth forums so that young people could explore the issues and ‘consider how we can work together to help reduce marginalisation and further support young people’. He said that a government review had highlighted:

... the importance of ensuring that initiatives to support schools are locally focussed and any expectations placed on school staff should be reasonable, particularly as their primary role must remain on delivering the curriculum.
Minister Keenan said:

Those who work with our young people are best placed to identify changes in behaviour and to intervene early to prevent our youth from going down the wrong path, before a law enforcement response is required.

− School terror fight. Lauren Wilson, Herald Sun, 6 February 2016
− Teachers learn how to detect jihadists. Natasha Bita, The Australian, 6 February 2016

*All of Us*

The Australian Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, has defended a program run in schools to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) students, but stressed that implementation of the program is optional for schools.

*All of Us*, a Safe Schools Coalition teaching resource on gender diversity, sexual diversity and intersex topics, had been described in sections of the media as less of an anti-bullying resource and more a promotion of an LGBTI lifestyle. The resource, which is reportedly in use in hundreds of Australian schools, includes lesson plans that ask students in years 7 and 8 to roleplay situations that help them understand 'same sex attracted experiences'.

The *Herald Sun* reported that a mother was withdrawing her children from a government school in Frankston because she believed what they were being taught was ‘dangerous’ and ‘age inappropriate’.

Kevin Donnelly, writing in *The Age*, said that, having read the resources, ‘it is obvious students, under the guise of anti-bullying, are being subjected to a well-resourced campaign enforcing an LGBTI sexuality and gender agenda’.

*The Australian* reported that Greg Donnelly, a member for the Labor Party in the New South Wales Legislative Council, said:

> We are talking about little boys and girls, who are in effect a captured audience, being presented with overt sexual and gender ideology that is being presented as a matter of fact ...

> Their parents, of course, are being kept in the dark.

A *media release on the Safe Schools Coalition website* describes *All of Us* as an awareness raising toolkit that ‘will make schools safer and more inclusive not just for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, but for their friends, teachers and families too’.

Minister Birmingham *said that he wanted to reassure parents that*:

> ... this is a voluntary program that schools opt into. It is, of course, the classroom teacher in conjunction with the principal and the rest of the school community who choose to pick things out of this program that they think are worthwhile and translate them into that school environment.

− Fury at school gender lesson. Olivia Lambert, Herald Sun, 8 February 2016
− Bullying message lost in all the rainbow flag waving. Angela Shanahan, *The Australian*, 13 February 2016

*Closing the Gap*

The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has delivered the eighth annual *Closing the Gap statement* to the House of Representatives.

Prime Minister Turnbull said that while the challenge of closing the gap was ‘often described as a problem to be solved’, he viewed it as ‘an opportunity’. He acknowledged Indigenous Parliamentarians in the chamber, and
called for the ‘many successes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ not be overlooked, or left uncelebrated, when focussing on the gap to be closed.

As with previous years, he observed, progress towards the Closing the Gap targets has been mixed. While there has been progress with regards to child mortality (Indigenous child death rates declined by 33 per cent between 1998 and 2014) the life expectancy gap is still ‘around 10 years’ and ‘not on track to be met by 2031’. The target to halve the gap in employment by 2018, he said, was also unlikely to be met.

With regards to education, Prime Minister Turnbull observed that the gap in school attendance ‘remains sizeable’ but that according to the data, ‘on a given school day the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are attending school’. He said that ‘four of the eight measurement points for students achieving national minimum reading and numeracy standards’ were on track, and that ‘closing the gap in education is achievable’.

The Prime Minister said, however, that there were ‘very real and difficult challenges, particularly in isolated communities’. He noted that Indigenous Australians made up 3 per cent of the overall population, yet represented ‘a staggering’ 27 per cent of the prisoner population, before adding that ‘the Indigenous adult imprisonment rate is increasing’.

The ‘power of employment’ was the answer, the Prime Minister said. He declared that his government was working with Indigenous communities to ‘develop a blueprint for supporting, and then transitioning, people from prison to work, to security and prosperity’.

In his response to the Prime Minister’s statement, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten declared that the Gap would never be closed while the ‘re-imprisonment rate for Aboriginal young people is higher than the school retention rate’. He said the odds were ‘stacked’ against people who go to jail with the risk of mental issues or substance abuse increasing, and the ‘chances of finishing school, learning a trade or finding a good job’ decreasing. Labor’s community safety policies, he said, would be ‘shaped by the voices of people who truly know the justice gap: law enforcement, legal services, community sector experts’.

Noting that four out of the seven Closing the Gap targets were focused on education, Mr Shorten said that Labor’s ‘Your Child, Our Future’ education policy (see Weekly Briefing 1/2016) would ‘do more to close the gap in education than any policy decision in the last two generations’.

Greens spokesperson on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, Senator Rachel Siewert, said progress on closing the gap ‘doesn’t look good’. She attributed this, in part, to ‘the government ripping half a billion from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services in the 2014-15 budget, as well as the chaotic rollout of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy’ and urged the government to consider the recommendations in the Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report 2016.

The Independent Schools Council of Australia, (ISCA) welcomed the ‘strong focus on education for Indigenous students’ in Closing the Gap. ISCA Executive Director Colette Colman said:

Government funding needs to acknowledge the special needs of Indigenous students, particularly those from remote and very remote areas where often Independent schools are the sole education option. It is vital schools in these areas be adequately supported in their strategies to lift attendance, literacy, numeracy and Year 12 completion rates.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) said that ‘Gonski’ resources were needed to continue progress in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. AEU Federal President, Ms Correna Haythorpe said that ‘Gonski funding includes an extra loading for Indigenous students, because it recognises the extra needs they have and the importance of education in addressing Indigenous disadvantage’.

For the full 2016 Closing the Gap report, visit the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet website.

− PM flags united effort as frustration builds over failure to close the gaps. Sarah Martin, The Australian, 11 February 2016

Low Performing Students: Why They Fail and How to Help Them Succeed

A new report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has found that most countries have made ‘little progress helping their weakest students improve their performance in reading, mathematics and science over the past decade’.

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The report, *Low Performing Students: Why They Fail and How to Help Them Succeed*, considers the results of the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) between 2003 and 2012 and finds that many countries have seen their share of 'low performers' increase.

The outcome of this, according to OECD Director for Education and Skills, Mr Andreas Schleicher, is that 'too many young people are still leaving school without the basic skills needed in today’s society and workplace, hurting their futures and long-term economic growth'.

The OECD defines low performers as ‘15-year-old students who score below Level 2 on the PISA mathematics, reading and science assessment. The report finds that in Australia:

- socioeconomically disadvantaged students are five times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student
- students who have repeated a grade are three times as likely to be low performers than students who have not
- low performers spent an average of 3.5 hours per week doing homework. Students at or above proficiency Level 2 spent about 6.6 hours per week doing homework.

The OECD argues that all countries can improve student performance ‘given the right policies and the will to implement them’. Its proposals for implementation include:

- providing remedial support as early as possible
- encouraging parental and community involvement
- targeting support to disadvantaged schools and/or families
- offering special programs for immigrant, minority-language and rural students
- tackling gender stereotypes
- limiting the use of student sorting.

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University Ready

The Australian Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, has asked the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) to explore 'how to ensure incoming students are uni-ready'.

The request follows an ongoing debate in the media about the transparency of university policies as they relate to admissions and students’ Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATAR). Amidst reports that students have been admitted to university courses with an ATAR lower than the cut-off, and concerns that they may lack the capacity to complete these standards, some have asked if ATAR is a useful tool on which to base university admissions.

Minister Birmingham said that students needed to be provided with a ‘clear understanding of what they need to do to get into their course of choice and realising what will be expected of them through their further study’. He said that while universities determine their own admission requirements:

... exploring greater transparency measures will ensure that Australian students are provided [with] real information on what they need to do to be admitted to a course at a particular institution and universities are held to account for their public entry requirements. This will help to better match students’ aptitudes and interests to particular courses and institutions and ensure appropriate incentives to maintain high quality standards.

Universities Australia (UA) said that it would work closely with the HESP to improve the transparency of student admissions policies. Chief Executive, Ms Belinda Robinson, said:

... ATARs need to be supplemented by other entry processes and procedures that recognise the differing circumstances of our young people and that focus on the potential for successfully completing a university education.

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We are already living in a post-ATAR world. Greg Craven, *The Australian*, 3 February 2016
New Ministry

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s new ministry includes a new Minister for Vocational Education and Skills.

Senator Scott Ryan, who was previously a Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education and most recently Assistant Cabinet Secretary, is now the Minister for Vocational Education and Skills.

The former Minister for Vocational Education and Skills, Luke Hartsukyer, no longer features in the Ministry. Prime Minister Turnbull said of the former Minister:

I want to thank Luke for his contribution in that portfolio. He also has made a great contribution to the Coalition in opposition as well and we worked very closely together when I was the Shadow Communications Minister and he was the Shadow Minister for Regional Communications. He's a great parliamentarian, a great coalitionist and he will be missed.

VET Consultation

The Australian Government is calling for stakeholders to comment on the standard of assessment in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

The outgoing Minister for Vocational Education and Skills, Luke Hartsukyer, said that while most training providers were doing the ‘right thing’, students and employers have both raised concerns about assessment standards and the skills of graduates:

When a student decides to undertake a VET course they do so on the understanding they will be taught the skills that employers want and to the standard that employers expect ... Proper assessment processes that genuinely test a student’s capability and competency are an essential part of that bargain.

The public consultation closes on Friday 11 March 2016, with the feedback provided to inform options for consideration by the Skills Ministers at the COAG Industry and Skills Council.

For more information, or to participate in the consultation process, visit the Australian Government Department of Education and Training website.

Little Scientists and Let’s Count

The Prime Minister has announced that the Australian Government will invest $8 million in two programs for early years students, with the aim of equipping them with ‘the skills in maths and science for the jobs of tomorrow’.

Little Scientists’, a not-for-profit initiative, aims to ‘facilitate children’s curiosity for science, technology, engineering and mathematics through age-appropriate, fun and playful experiments already in their early years’. All Australian education and care services in Australia working with children aged 3 to 6 can join the program and become an accredited ‘Little Scientists’ House’.

Little Scientists Project Manager, Ms Sibylle Seidler, said that the program, which has been in use in Germany for ‘10 years’, aims to harness the natural curiosity of young children – the ‘fun in experimenting, exploring, like looking at the natural world and asking why’ – so that it continues through into their later education.

Let’s Count, a maths program by the Smith Family for children aged 3 to 5, ‘supports parents and early years educators to develop the maths skills of the children in their care by noticing, exploring and talking about numbers, counting, measurement and patterns in their daily lives’.

Smith Family CEO, Dr Lisa O’Brien, said that the $4 million boost from the government would ‘help build the early maths skills of Australian children’. She said that over the past five years, ‘nearly 13,000 preschoolers from disadvantaged communities have benefitted from our Let’s Count program’.

The Prime Minister said that he expects that the Little Scientists and Let’s Count programs will reach 350,000 young Australians ‘over the next three and four years’.
The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) has invited students, teachers and families to attend the VCE Season of Excellence Top Class Sound and Top Class Dance performances.

**Top Class Sound** is a program of original compositions by students of VCE Music Investigation and VCE Music Style and Composition from 2015. The concert will include dynamic forms and instrumentation, from classical chamber ensembles to jazz bands and electro-pop. The concert will be held on Tuesday 23 February 2016 at 1.30 pm at Melba Hall and the University of Melbourne.

Tickets are $15.00 ($12.50 for regional concession). Bookings can be made through the [Eventbrite website](https://www.eventbrite.com.au).

**Top Class Dance** presents a range of dance styles, from street and modern to jazz and classical, by VCE Dance and VCE VET Dance students from 2015. The performances will be presented over two concerts at the Melbourne Recital Centre on Thursday 25 February 2016. Concert 1 will start at 10.30 am and Concert 2 will start at 2.00 pm.

Tickets are $15 ($13 Regional Concession) or $27 ($23 Regional Concession) for a two-dance concert package. Bookings can be made through the [Melbourne Recital Centre website](http://www.melbournerecital.com.au) or by phone on (03) 9699 3333.

Pre-Booking is recommended for both the Top Class Dance and Top Class Sound performances as door sales will be subject to availability.

**Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors Scholarships**

The Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS) is offering scholarships for Year 12 students looking to study Quantity Surveying, Construction Economics and Construction Management (Economics) at university. The scholarship includes $2000.00 in cash and $1000.00 in AIQS published text books and manuals.

To apply, students must submit:

- an application form
- a certified copy of their Year 11 academic record, results and report
- a 500 word essay that ‘describes the role and services of the Quantity Surveyor (Project Cost Estimator) and comments on the future of the Quantity Surveying profession’.

Applications close on Tuesday 26 April 2016. For more information, visit the [AIQS website](http://www.aiqs.org.au).