

Preface to *The Deepening Divide*

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On the eve of the new millennium we find ourselves quite naturally gripped between two very powerful arms: on the one hand, reflections upon the century in which we have lived; and on the other, anticipation of the century that lies ahead. The media is awash with millennium theories and many a shelf could be lined with the latest books covering every aspect of the field.

The *Deepening Divide* and its companion volume, *Australia's Youth: Reality and Risk*, I believe demand a particular place in our deliberations on the close of the 20th Century and the prospects for the 21st.

There is a simple justification for such a seemingly bold claim.

These reports directly and most comprehensively address the learning and work circumstances of young Australians: *Reality and Risk* published just twelve months ago laid the foundations with its focus on 15-19 year olds while this volume takes up the story with its extended emphasis on young adults (those 20-24 years of age). Taken together they represent a uniquely informed and challenging portrait of Australian "youth". As such these reports are surely of fundamental significance to all the principal millennium themes: nationhood and identity; our economic standing and the prospects of future prosperity; our personal and collective visions for our society generations hence.

Neither report is an easy read. Neither is inspirational in the abstract. On the contrary, they are solid fare, stuffed full of data, tables and the research community's staple diet of tables, extrapolations and the like. Do not be daunted. For there is much plain speaking and explanation to ensure that anyone with a stake in Australia's future can come to the table and get a good taste of what's on offer.

In coming to this body of research, however, I would urge you to do as we have done: to probe the information for the policy responses that will better serve young Australians and, in consequence, the nation. We lay no claim to exclusive possession of the "right answers" but we are certain that informed policy will always be better policy. We have

endeavoured to put informed policy options on the table. We advocate their adoption, but not in the absence of vigorous debate.

For the Dusseldorp Skills Forum the release of the *Deepening Divide* is the culmination of an intense and demanding two-year collaboration with a number of Australia's leading researchers and research organisations. Their names will be familiar to many and appear elsewhere in this volume. The generosity of intellect and spirit from all concerned has been the hallmark of this undertaking. It is evident in the fruits of this labour.

I have suggested that the *Deepening Divide* is not inspirational in the abstract. It is however both enlightening and disturbing. For the Dusseldorp Skills Forum - and we hope for many others- it is a resounding challenge not just to do more but to do better.

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