

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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NEW MINISTER'S VISION FOR AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING

From the Executive Director

The new Federal Minister for Education and Youth, the Hon Alan Tudge MP recently delivered his first major speech on schooling at the Menzies Research Centre on 11 March 2021. Titled *“Returning Australia to the top group of education nations”*¹, the speech outlined the Minister’s vision for Australian schooling.

Mr Tudge was appointed Minister for Education and Youth in the Cabinet reshuffle of December 2020. He is the fourth Education Minister since the Coalition Government was elected in 2013². The Liberal Party member for the Melbourne-based seat of Ashton, Mr Tudge has previously held the Ministerial portfolios of Human Services (2016–2017), Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs (2017–2018) and Cities, Urban Infrastructure and Population (2018–2020).

Minister Tudge was first elected to Federal Parliament in 2010. Prior to entering Parliament Mr Tudge worked as a consultant for the Boston Consulting Group. He also was a Senior Adviser to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Education from 2002 to 2006 and Deputy Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership from 2006 to 2009³.

The key feature of the Minister’s speech was a call to “set ourselves a 2030 target to be again amongst the top group of nations across the three major domains of reading, maths and science”.

The Minister outlined the evidence, pointing to “our standards have dropped in both absolute terms and relative to other countries” based principally on the OECD’s PISA⁴ tests of 15-year-olds. The outcomes of PISA have been well documented in many publications and research reports, with the Minister concluding that our decline in performance has been “across the board” and “as our student results have fallen, we have dropped behind more and more countries”.

Mr Tudge queried why our decline in international performance has not been a national topic of conversation – “perhaps the lack of attention is

because the decline has been gradual rather than sudden”. However, he concluded “when viewed over a twenty-year period, it is profound, and it will have consequences for our long-term productivity and competitiveness”.

Whilst the Minister acknowledges that there is no consensus as to why our performance has declined over the last twenty years, he is certain it is not a funding issue, noting that funding for schooling has gone up considerably in real per capita terms, while at the same time standards have declined.

He says class sizes are not the issue with a steady decline over the past few decades.

Minister Tudge outlines his three focus areas if we are to be amongst the top performing countries: quality teaching, the Australian Curriculum, and assessment.

Mr Tudge confirms that quality teaching is the most important in-school factor in determining student performance and acknowledges that it is the states and territories and non-government school authorities, as the employers of teachers, that realistically face the challenge of improving teaching quality.

He points out that the Federal government’s “main leverage” over quality teaching is its funding of universities to deliver Initial Teacher Education courses.

1 A copy of the speech is available at <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/being-our-best-returning-australia-top-group-education-nations>

2 Previous Education Ministers under the current Coalition Government were Christopher Pyne (2013–2015), Simon Birmingham (2015–2018) and Dan Tehan (2018–2020)

3 The Cape York Institute conducts a range of education programs including Good to Great Schools, and operates two independent schools – Djarragun College (Gordonvale) and Girl Academy (Wangetti Beach).

4 The Programme for International Student Assessment – see <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/> for details and refer to <https://www.acer.org/au/pisa/key-findings-2018> for Australian specific data on PISA (PISA in Australia is administered by the Australian Council for Education Research).

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He believes Australia has made significant progress on the task of raising standards in the selection and training of teachers guided by the recommendations of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG)⁵.

He proposes that “the next evolution of reforms is needed, to build from the TEMAG reforms” and has subsequently announced a new review of initial teacher education to be conducted by a panel chaired by former Department of Education and Training Secretary Lisa Paul⁶.

In terms of Australian Curriculum, he wants our curriculum standards to be benchmarked against top performing countries and notes that ACARA is currently reviewing, updating and decluttering the content of the Australian Curriculum⁷.

The Minister made it clear that he would like to see a greater focus on the fundamentals of reading, mathematics, and civics and citizenship.

The Minister sees effective assessment and feedback as the third priority area, noting that it influences student achievement. He is clear that NAPLAN is important – “we must protect NAPLAN” but recognises the need for continued refinement to optimise information for schools, teachers, parents, and policy makers.

Mr Tudge sees an embedding of formative assessment in every classroom as an important development in the future.

The Minister also committed to giving a priority to Indigenous students,

particularly those in remote areas, noting “this has been a long-term commitment of mine”.

The Minister ended his speech on a positive note commenting “I am optimistic that we can lift Australian school standards to put us among the world’s best education systems again”.

Comment: Challenges Ahead

The Minister’s speech outlining his vision for schooling contained no great surprises. This is understandable given the Minister himself admits “I have learnt that there is no silver bullet in education”.

One of the biggest challenges for any Federal Government vision for schooling is that they do not operate schools, employ teachers, or determine student policies and priorities. The Minister acknowledged this in his speech and offered to “work collaboratively with those who share the ambition of a world-class education system.” No doubt every Federal Education Minister, no matter of which political persuasion, has made this very same offer. Perhaps it is time for a different approach? Education bureaucracies stepping out of the way of education professionals and giving them more autonomy and flexibility might be a good place to start.

The Minister’s focus on teacher quality is backed up by research but there is likely little enthusiasm for yet another review or inquiry into teacher quality. It is only five or so years since the major TEMAG review. Perhaps, a scan

of what TEMAG recommendations have been implemented well and have worked, and picking up a few key questions (such as should there be a cut-off ATAR score for entry into pre-service education) might suffice at the current time.

Education reforms can take a generation to achieve results, so another round of teacher quality reforms, before previous reforms have been embedded and evaluated, might simply result in more reform fatigue.

The one area the Minister could have a closer look at is how the increased funding for schooling is being utilised. He stated that the focus is now on how to use school funding rather than how much schools should get or the distribution between sectors. However, he provides little detail on how this might be achieved.

His statement that “I am pleased that the school funding wars are now over” will be a great disappointment to many independent schools which will have a significant reduction in their Commonwealth funding over the next ten years.

The Gonski funding reforms since 2014 have resulted in significant additional funding to schools, yet there has not been any evaluation of whether the increased funding has been targeted enough or whether it has made a difference. A formal review would be worthwhile as there is always the danger that increased funding simply allows schools to do more of what has already been proven to not work. The National School Resourcing Board could undertake this task.

Finally, the Minister’s proposed 2030 target of Australia being amongst the top group of nations across the three major domains of reading, maths and science” is laudable and should be supported by everybody.

Our schooling system has been littered with targets of all kinds over the past 20 years. There appears to have been

5 TEMAG was established in 2014 and reported in late 2014. See Action Now, Classroom Ready Teachers Report at <https://www.dese.gov.au/uncategorised/resources/action-now-classroom-ready-teachers-report>

6 See Ministerial Media Release of 15 April 2021 at <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/initial-teacher-education-review-launched>

7 See <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum-review> for further information on the current review of the Australian Curriculum.



The Hon Alan Tudge MP
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
AND YOUTH

“We should set ourselves a new goal of being back amongst the world’s best within a decade.”

<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tudge/being-our-best-returning-australia-top-group-education-nations>

little accountability about reaching the targets or taking substantial policy changes when targets aren't met.

Targets based on an international test are appropriate. However, the context should be well explained and understood. PISA is only conducted every three years – possibly not frequently enough to seriously monitor progress. In addition, the performance of some countries is not on a par with Australia. For example, we know that China, which is one of the top performers in PISA, is not a national test but selective participation of a number of provinces/municipalities.

Despite all these challenges, we are all hoping that the new Minister can effectively facilitate improvements in our student outcomes. Independent schools, as always, will work collaboratively and positively with the Federal Government in this task.

Unfortunately, the Minister does not have a lengthy window of opportunity to make his mark on schooling. A Federal election must be held before September 2022, so the pathway to achieving a new national target will be subjected to the pressures of an election, a potential change of Government and, even if the current Government is re-elected, a potential change of Minister.

The challenges faced by any Federal Government in achieving a significant reform agenda in schooling are many.

We wish the new Minister for Education and Youth, Alan Tudge, all the best in his vision for Australian schooling. Let's hope for our children's sake, he is highly successful in achieving it.



DAVID ROBERTSON
Executive Director
Independent Schools Queensland

TOP TRENDS IN 2021 LEADERS NEED TO HEED



SHARI ARMISTEAD
Director (Strategic Relations)

As COVID-19 continues to create uncertainty, leaders need to step up and lead by being completely open and honest with sharing information, making tough calls early and backing themselves.

McCRINDLE RESEARCH,
STRATEGIC INSIGHTS 2021.

2020 was unquestionably a year like no other. For leaders, it was important to not only crisis manage the pandemic as it was evolving, it was equally important to look ahead to what 2021 might bring and prepare for the inevitable changes.

Researchers have come up with the top trends for 2021 and some reveal a fast-tracked evolution that was already in the making, while others forecast vast changes and important social, cultural and global trends set to shape the future. A quarter of 2021 has already gone, if school leaders aren't already riding the trends train to aid forward planning, it's time to get on board.

McCrindle's top ten research-based predictions for the year ahead were released on 29 January at its virtual Strategic Insights 2021 webinar event presented by Mark McCrindle – principal, demographer and futurist – and Ashley Fell – TEDx speaker, author and Director of Communications at McCrindle (McCrindle Research, 2021). The McCrindle top ten is a mix of demographic, technological, cultural, and social trends that impact all businesses, including schools.

McCrindle Strategic Insights 2021

1. Demographic transitions

Slowing of population growth due in part to closed international borders halting the growth of migration, and coinciding with Australia's lowest recorded birth rate. Australia is predicted to have 1 million people less in a decade than predicted prior to COVID-19.

2. Rise of the regions

Just 10 percent of Australian's live outside capital cities however the decoupling of work and the workplace has given rise to people's interest in the appeal of regional areas. Regions have always had lifestyle advantages; now they have employment benefits too.

3. The return to local

More people working from home means more people looking local for services and entertainment, leading to geographical communities becoming the local community.

4. Housing redefined

McCrindle Research has shown that half of Australians are planning to look for a new home to rent or buy in the next two years that incorporates more of what they value – such as more outdoor space, and a separate study. This is more common among people living in apartments and among those who worked from home in 2020, showing COVID-19 to be the catalyst for this shift.

5. Cautious consumers

Uncertainties around employment and the realities of a recession will mean people will continue to build their savings and pay off debt, as opposed to spending. Two in five Australians (41%) said they managed to save more money than usual in 2020.

6. Generational change

A generation is a product of their current age, their times, and importantly the formative technologies and social markers that have uniquely shaped them. As more generations mix in our societies, families, communities and workplaces, it will be more important than ever to gain insight into their defining characteristics and expectations and respond appropriately.

7. Digital integration

Technology will continue to constantly change, developing faster than ever before. In a COVID-19 environment, organisations will need to adapt to change in mere weeks instead of years, to keep up with consumer demand for simplicity, personalisation and customisation as a result of digital integration.

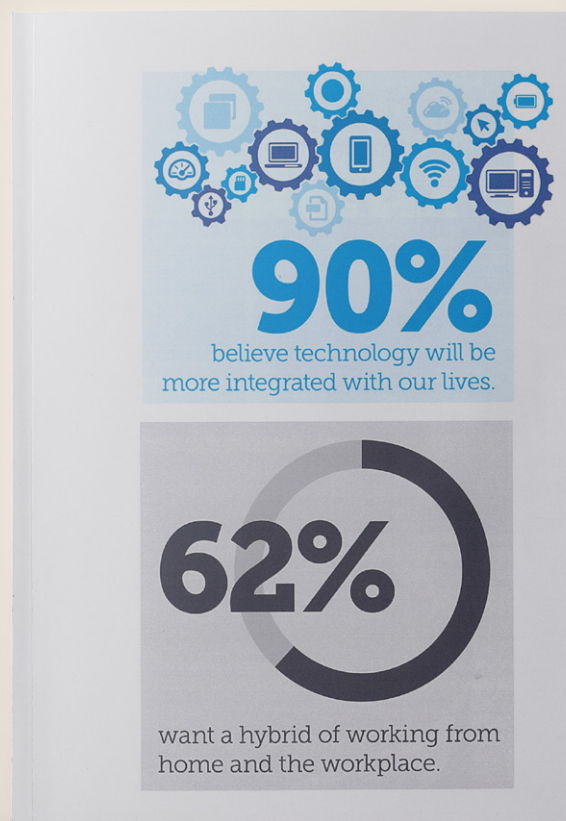
8. The future of work will be hybrid

Three in five (62%) of Australians are looking for a mix of working from home and in the workplace. The hybrid approach shows that the aspects of workplace culture and community that are missed when working solely from home can be met when workers meet in the workplace to collaborate.

9. A focus on wellbeing

After a decade of digital disruption, screen saturation and 24/7 expectations, Australians were struggling to find a sustainable pace of life. While COVID-19 brought anxiety, health concerns and financial

Figure 1: The changing face of work for employees



McCrindle Strategic Insights 2021.
Adapted from: *School Marketing Journal*, 2021, p. 5.

impacts, it also gave people a chance to rebalance their lives. In 2021, Australians will look for ways to maintain a slower pace of life, greater work/life integration, time savings and a focus on their wellbeing.

10. The importance of leadership

As COVID-19 continues to create uncertainty, leaders need to step up and lead by being completely open and honest with sharing information, making tough calls early and backing themselves, while leading with confidence, empathy and vision.

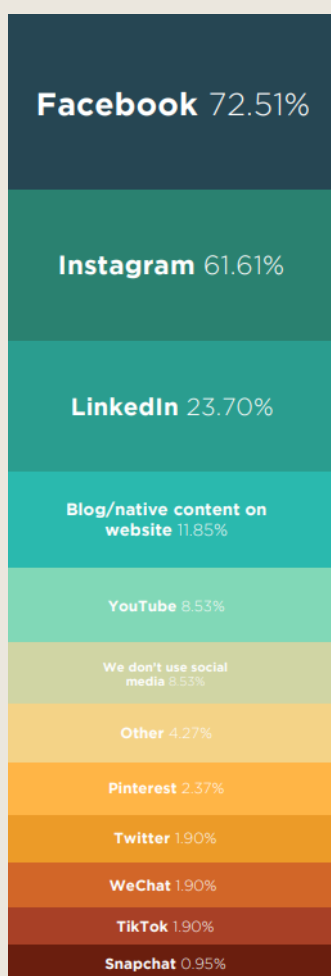
In December 2020, futurist, internationally best-selling author and business strategist Bernard Marr published a list of the top ten trends to be ready for in 2021 in *Forbes*, and like

McCrindle, Marr (2021) urges leaders to look closely at the workplace. He says leaders need to consider working from home, "for real" (para. 2) and that means "businesses need to reimagine their own workspaces as well as provide the proper support for people working from home, such as outfit them with the right office equipment, mental health support and more so everyone can work from home comfortably" (para. 2). Next in Marr's list is *Data as an Asset*: the massive increases in data and cloud-based storage and solutions means leaders need to treat data as the asset it is and secure it. He says they also need to invest in data literacy for employees, and analysis to get the most out of this proliferation of digital information. Marr also highlights *Virtual Interfaces* and the need to deliver more integrated technologies for customers

TOP TRENDS IN 2021 LEADERS NEED TO HEED CONTINUED

Figure 2: Social Media Efficacy During the Pandemic

Q. WHICH ARE THE TWO MOST EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS YOUR RETAIL BUSINESS USES?



Source: KPMG, 2021, p. 10.

who will want to try before they buy. For schools this could mean virtual open days and augmented reality. He also says there will be “a big push towards a more authentic presence on social media” (para. 11) and that means a need for real social engagement.

The pandemic created, influenced and accelerated some of the biggest trends. Working from home/ increased flexibility in the workplace, authenticity and purpose are common to most top ten lists. Euromonitor International’s white paper, *Top ten global consumer trends 2021* also identified “safety obsessed” as the new wellness movement driving demand for hygiene products and contactless solutions and “shaken and stirred” as the need for services that support resiliency for mental wellbeing (Angus, 2021a).

Euromonitor International’s white paper co-author Alison Angus sums up what leaders need to do in an article in *Researchworld*:

“Investing in technology and virtual experiences is critical to facilitate engagement with consumers both online and in person. Purpose-driven initiatives will resonate with consumers in 2021. Amidst social unrest, consumers want the facts and expect brands to act. Communicating with compassion and supporting mental wellbeing are critical attributes to drive brand loyalty” (Angus, 2021b).

KPMG’s *Australian Retail Outlook 2021*, a survey report co-produced with Inside Retail also identified key trends and forecasts.

“Initially, COVID-19 was widely predicted to have a devastating effect on many retailers. Instead, retail collapses hit record lows as government initiatives (such as JobKeeper and the temporary suspension of insolvent trading laws) protected retailers. Consumers hoarded cash and retailers pivoted to online, driving some to produce financial results way beyond expectations. We believe that 2021 may be the year that challenges retailers even more as we cope with reduction of stimuli and return to some form of business as usual. COVID-19 has accelerated digital disruption and consumers are living, thinking and purchasing differently” (KPMG, 2021, p. 5).

KPMG’s survey found consumer demand for greater personal safety and value for money were influencing buying decisions including online purchases. Not surprisingly, the survey found that 70 percent of businesses invested more in the digital side of their business. It also found Facebook continues to lead the way in terms of social media advertising (72.5 percent), followed by Instagram (61.6 percent) and LinkedIn (23.7 percent) (see Figure 2). During the peak of the pandemic, while stores were closed and more people were online, many retailers invested in content to continue engaging their customers.

While social media may have been the saviour of some businesses, “social media has also been responsible for magnifying panic and anxiety, fuelling social contagion” (as cited in AdNews, 2020, para. 11), according to Dentsu’s iProspect findings on five key trends affecting Australians in 2021, and how

“Amidst social unrest, consumers want the facts and expect brands to act. Communicating with compassion and supporting mental wellbeing are critical attributes to drive brand loyalty.”

ANGUS (2021b)

brands can adapt for them. The report asserts that “brands have a role to play in behaving responsibly, using social media and owned channels in the right way, managing news without sensationalism” (as cited in AdNews, 2020, para. 12).

Sam Cousins, Head of Strategy & Planning at iProspect Australia, and author of the report said:

“It may sound simple, but linking all of your data intelligence to better plan communications based on these 5 trends, will provide better results. 2021 is an opportunity to capitalise on what we have learnt and prepare for a post pandemic life through to 2022. Those consumers that we can instil trust into now, will be loyal as the world evolves” (as quoted in AdNews, 2020, para. 2).

Dentsu’s iProspect Five Key Trends 2021

1. Conscious Choice

Consumers are evaluating every decision around safety, hygiene and values. Channels that make people feel connected to the brand through emotion or storytelling are important to make them feel they have made the right choice for them and their family.

2. Homebody Economy

COVID-19 accelerated homebased life has reshaped how we live our daily lives. There has been a resurgence of ‘long form’ consumption but also in format, especially amongst finance, government and other service brands – including schools.

3. Population Adaption

Australians are re-assessing where they live, with more space and being close to nature a key drawcard.

Understanding the role of ‘where’ and the context of ‘what’ will be equally as important. As the footprint spreads, regional areas grow, and the population ages, broadening our targeting and redefining how we talk to different audience groups with different motivations, will be key.

4. Localism Rules

Not only will we live and work closer to home but we will invest in small and buy local. Brands that promote themselves as Australian or homegrown will build trust. Dynamic messaging curated for nuance by each area is important as people will become more parochial about where they live, and a one size fits all approach won’t work.

5. Anxious Nation

2020 has created a perfect storm for a nation just holding on to what normal looks like. Once you add in solitude for many, extensive job losses and high unemployment and a bleak economic future, all the ingredients are there to set the scene for a concerning 2021. Brands have a role to play in behaving responsibly. Humans crave nature – is there a way your brand can bring the outside in? Music and other streaming services or mental health and meditation brands are also excellent partners to work with in this space, benefiting not only your customers, but your employees too.

Conclusion

Schools are community hubs with parents, carers and students looking to school leaders to model good behaviour and values. Leaders are well-aware of these responsibilities and are dedicated to meeting them.

Schools are also a service industry in the business of providing education to young people. While independent schools are not-for-profit and their purpose is a moral one, to help students realise their full potential, the top trends for 2021 identified by the researchers in this feature still apply to school leaders and, in a pandemic world, enlightened heads will use this information to help them plan for a better future.

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ACN 614 893 140 ABN 88 662 995 577



**Independent Schools
Queensland**

choice & diversity

Head Office

Level 1, 96 Warren Street, Spring Hill Q 4000
PO Box 957, Spring Hill Q 4004
P (07) 3228 1515 E office@isq.qld.edu.au

Professional Learning Centre

Level 5, 500 Queen Street, Brisbane Q 4000
P (07) 3228 1507 E events@isq.qld.edu.au

www.isq.qld.edu.au