

The World Today with Eleanor Hall

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If this were sport rather than education, we'd have a consistently funded national plan

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ELEANOR HALL: Could our failure to improve standards in schools be linked to the inconsistency in funding for teacher training projects?

That's certainly the view of one expert in the field.

Associate Professor Vincent Geiger, from the National School of Education at the Australian Catholic University, has been working in maths education for more than two decades.

He spoke to me earlier from Brisbane, just before the final meeting for one of his training projects.

Professor Geiger, we've had international surveys and now NAPLAN again showing disappointing results for Australian students, particularly in your field of maths; and this is despite Federal Government funding for a range of science and maths programs.

Does this suggest the Government's putting its money into the wrong areas?

VINCENT GEIGER: I'm not sure that I'd argue that they're putting the money into the wrong areas.

If you have a look at the suite of initiatives, I think broad strategy and policy is well targeted. For example, we now have initiatives at the levels of pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, curriculum and teacher professional standards.

The problem we have is that we lack continuity within each of these initiatives.

We start them off. We let them run for three years. We evaluate them with great scrutiny and then we ask people to apply with new projects for new batches of money.

It seems to me such a pity that we can't make some decisions about which programs appear to be the most successful and then provide ongoing funding so that we get some continuity in what we do.

We give time for teachers to embed new ideas; and also so that we can value these things in a broader longitudinal frame.

ELEANOR HALL: So if the issue is a lack of consistency in funding, rather than what's being funded, can you give an example of a program that has been shut down despite evidence that it's helped lift standards?

VINCENT GEIGER: Yes. I wouldn't say "shut down", but I can give the example of a program that I've been recently involved with.

I'm on the leadership group of a project called 'Opening Real Science.' This project was part of a program called 'Enhancing Training of Mathematics and Science Teachers.'

It's been run over three years. There were a number of universities as partners. And we've developed a

series of online modules that look at framing mathematical knowledge and science knowledge within real-world applications.

The project's been evaluated. We've had very positive feedback from the evaluators. But in an hour's time I have the final meeting of the project. We have no indication whether there will be more money forthcoming, which we find a little bit sad.

ELEANOR HALL: Have you asked the Government for the funding to be extended?

VINCENT GEIGER: Well it's not so much about asking Government directly, but we sort of have sounded out whether there will be any further money available.

Responses are always cautious to that sort of question. But this sort of thing has been my experience through a range of programs.

I've been involved in projects of different types for probably more than 20 years. I was a secondary mathematics teacher for 22 years and I've been working in tertiary education for the last 11.

So we do spend a lot of time actually investing in the writing of projects, rather than potentially building on previous projects.

ELEANOR HALL: You say that this project was partly an online resource. Can't that element of it continue, despite the funding potentially ending?

VINCENT GEIGER: Yes. Well, the program itself was in and around the development of online modules that'll be available to all institutions that have pre-service training.

The problem is that even websites require funding to sustain the program: even keeping a website up to date, keeping it looking fresh and new. There's nothing worse than people searching around and looking at something that's staid and aged.

I really believe that what we need to be doing in this country at the moment is looking at a 10-year plan, rather than shorter grabs like we seem to be funding at the moment.

You know, it gives much more opportunity to find out what works in a longer sense, not the sort of measure you can implement after development and then evaluation in only three years.

ELEANOR HALL: So how do countries which are successful in improving their maths and science standards measure up on this issue of consistent funding?

VINCENT GEIGER: Places like Singapore are well acknowledged to have been up there for a very long time. The last round of TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), though, is interesting because typically we've been outperformed by countries like Korea, Japan and Singapore.

Places like Ireland went past us most recently, so I'm already in a conversation about exactly what they're doing there. My initial conversation is that they've had actually a very long-term plan.

ELEANOR HALL: So the long-term plan is consistent across countries like Singapore and Korea and Ireland?

VINCENT GEIGER: That seems to be the case, yes.

If you want to look at places like Singapore, they have something like even in terms of their curriculum revision. It's in the terms of five to six years.

And they don't throw out the whole thing again and restart. They will make nuanced changes to what they're already doing to take themselves forward.

The most recent change in Singapore was actually to keep much of what they had before but add the idea of problem solving and mathematical modelling to what they were doing.

ELEANOR HALL: So you say that ideally you'd like to see a 10-year funding plan. To what extent is that possible in Australia, where education funding is shared between the states and the Federal Government?

VINCENT GEIGER: It's extremely difficult, not just because of the nature of our Federation, where education is the responsibility of each state and territory, but also in terms of the political cycle.

To go forward, what we actually need is some bipartisan support for some carefully thought-out and constructed plan for the future.

I have to say: I thought we may have been heading in that direction with the introduction of an Australian national curriculum, but what I see across the country is that time goes on and the various negotiations that have taken place about alignment with a national curriculum is not much shift from the difference and distinctiveness of curriculum in each state and territory.

It's going to take a fair degree of political will to change where we're going.

It was interesting to hear one of the politicians say recently that, you know, if we'd put in this level of performance in at the Olympics, all hell would have broken loose and there would have been all sorts of plans and funding put in place.

I sadly don't think that's going to happen

ELEANOR HALL: Professor Geiger, thanks very much for speaking to us.

VINCENT GEIGER: Thank you very much, Eleanor.

ELEANOR HALL: That's Associate Professor Vincent Geiger from the National School of Education at the Australian Catholic University.

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