PART ONE
The Best Features Of Australian Education
A solid education is the equivalent of a super power. In his 6th October 2016 blog (gatesnotes.com), Bill Gates wrote that one of four objectives political leaders should prioritise is, “Give every student and teacher new tools so all students get a world-class education.” Learning opens humans’ eyes to possibilities and options. Credentials can change people’s entire quality of life, giving them earning potential and changing where they live and with whom they associate. Educational achievements can inspire personal confidence and positive self-concept. Schools can provide a safe haven for those struggling in their other environments. Teachers can be the most powerful role models, inspiring their students to change and strive for more.

It is easy to be critical about education when one is teaching or learning in a system that is achieving numerous quality outcomes. It is natural and commendable to strive for continuous improvement and focus on what HAS NOT, rather than what HAS been achieved.

This article, therefore, focuses on the BEST features of Australian education. The intent of this article is not to claim that Australia has reached a panacea of education or that all of the country’s schools and universities maintain the same high-quality standards. This article lists and describes 15 commendable features of education that can be found in Australian schools and universities and that should be celebrated and shared. It is written to answer the question – if an educator was to look for inspiration from Australian education, what features should they be encouraged to emulate? These features apply to all levels of education, from primary and secondary to post-secondary, including postgraduate studies. Readers will notice that many of these features are technology enhanced and that is indeed the overall advantage or, in other words, super-strength of Australian education – students, teachers, schools and institutions have access to useful technologies and have made wise choices regarding how and when to apply these technologies for learning.

1. Australian education is student focused.
2. Australian education develops students’ minds and bodies.
3. Australian students are taught to think and how to learn.
5. Australian teachers build strong and caring relationships with their students.
6. Australian education is personalised and equitable.
7. Australian education provides pastoral care to those in need.
8. Australian education is varied, giving students access to numerous disciplines.
9. Australian students have access to portals and learning management systems.
10. Australian students do most of their study on their own computers.
11. Australian students have access to useful software and applications.
12. Australian assessment is well designed and promotes quality feedback.
13. Australian students are given rubrics to guide their work.
14. Australian education focuses on graduate outcomes.
15. Australian graduates have skills for careers and further study.

### 1. Student Focused

Teaching does not matter if students do not learn. Metaphorically, imagine if a star teacher from another planet came to teach in his alien language. It does not matter how accomplished that teacher is if the students that are being taught cannot understand. Learning will not happen. Conversely, Australian teachers seek to understand whether their students are learning and if they are not, these teachers change their methods. In Australia, teaching is defined as all of the actions that the teacher undertakes that help students learn. Therefore, teaching means lecturing and presenting content to the students. Teaching also means giving feedback on assessment, tutoring students who need extra help and meeting with families to understand the students’ context and what might be inhibiting learning.

Being student focused also means that Australian teachers focus on the whole student experience. They are interested not only in interactions with students inside the classroom, but also students’ friendships and peer support. Australian educators seek to help students to become well rounded, balancing study, sport, music, leadership pursuits and other extra-curricular activities.

### 2. Minds and Bodies

Australia’s climate is conducive to spending time outdoors. Many parts of Australia have little variation between seasons, with lots of days of sunshine throughout the year. Teachers are known to take their students outside, which increases opportunities for incidental learning. In addition, the Australian culture embraces competition, rivalry and adventurous, outdoor pursuits. As a result, schools and universities tend to have a strong emphasis on sport, supporting all levels of participation from club level to elite. There is also a reasonably high tolerance for physical risk and a less litigious environment compared to some other countries. Because schools have less worry
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about being sued, they are able to offer more rugged physical activity, including adventure camps and more challenging playground equipment. Research has shown that physical activity and overall fitness stimulates mental performance. Australian students thrive in an environment where they are encouraged to develop both their minds and bodies. Fitness breaks rest their minds and can boost their academic performance.

3. How to Think and Learn
In 1910, John Dewey, an educational theorist and thought leader, wrote a paraphrased version of the proposition, “It is not the purpose of education to teach every piece of information, but to train habits of mind and teach students how to differentiate between tested and untested beliefs.” This is even more relevant in the modern age with the Internet. Students can now Google anything and receive countless Wikipedia and YouTube facts, descriptions, demonstrations and explanations. The teacher does not need to be the keeper (or conveyor) of information or the sage-on-the-stage. The teacher’s role is the guide-on-the-side. Australian teachers tend not to dole out long lists of facts and figures, asking students to memorise and repeat. Instead, Australian teachers use approaches such as case studies and problem-based learning to teach students how to apply and assimilate knowledge. Learning how to think and how to learn, through their teachers’ guidance, allows students to achieve increasing independence for higher level studies and how to think on their feet in their eventual careers.

4. Active Learning
Australian students do a lot more in their classrooms than listening and taking notes. When teachers lesson plan, they write down not only what they will do in the teaching exchange, but also what their students will do. Australian students build, create, test, construct, dissect, sort, organise, experiment, debate, discuss, diagram and illustrate. They actively engage with their learning so that the school-based experience has the variety and change of real life.

5. Caring Relationships between Teachers and Students
Whereas some cultures have a strong and established power imbalance between teachers and students, this is not the case in Australian education. In fact, it can be rather unnerving for international students who have moved from other countries and cultures. Australian teachers tend not to dole out long lists of facts and figures, asking students to memorise and repeat. Instead, Australian teachers use approaches such as case studies and problem-based learning to teach students how to apply and assimilate their own by expressing their own supported perspectives. Teachers want to get to know their students and want students to visit them during their office hours. Students do not embarrass themselves by asking questions. Teachers are much less happy when students pretend that they understand and do not ask for help.

6. Personalised and Equitable
There are some groups of students who tend to have more problems and challenges than others. In Australia, examples of students who may require extra support are those with disabling conditions, those from regional and remote areas, particularly if their parents did not attend university, those who were raised in low socio-economic conditions, and females who are in traditionally male disciplines such as engineering. These students are not excluded from school or university. They are invited, encouraged and welcomed. Extra supports are put into place to ensure they feel like they belong and that their needs are met. Data analytics are applied to provide early alerts to contact students at risk of failing, dropping out or becoming stressed out. For example, if students do not access the online learning materials that other students in their class are regularly using and do not interact online with others in the education spaces, then someone contacts them to find out why and what can be done to help.

The remaining features will be outlined in part two of this article in the next issue of Education Technology Solutions.

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