



True Leaders 2017: Skilling Australia Foundation's Nicholas Wyman renews schools

by Tim Dodd

In 2012, Nicholas Wyman had a revelation. For eight years he'd been in leadership roles in not-for-profit groups working to improve the skills of young people and prepare them to get jobs. But it was frustrating. "We were getting young people applying for apprenticeships who weren't ready to take on full-time work," he says. Kids were coming out of school without a clear perception of what it meant to have a job and didn't have the skills or the attitudes employers needed.

Then Wyman won a Churchill Fellowship to study what other countries were doing in the school-to-work transition and, while listening to National Public Radio in the US, first heard about a P-TECH school in Brooklyn, New York.

New Type of School

At P-TECH schools – the name is derived from Pathways in Technology – students stay for an extra two years after year 12.

And in that time these students have the opportunity to complete a useful, job-attracting post-school qualification. At the Brooklyn school it was an associate degree in a STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subject, or in information technology.

P-TECH schools also have close relationships with an employer and a tertiary education institution. In the Brooklyn school's case it is IBM and the City University of New York.

Wyman couldn't help but want to know more. "I just cold-called the principal, struck up a conversation and invited myself."

His serendipitous contact with the Brooklyn school started a chain reaction. Wyman began campaigning for similar schools in Australia. He used all the political and business leverage he could muster to build support for the concept, culminating in a visit by then prime minister Tony Abbott to the Brooklyn P-TECH in 2014. "He [Abbott] really got it," says Wyman.



Nicholas Wyman aims to change the social mindset regarding the prospects offered by vocational education. *Hayden Brotchie Photography*



Tony Abbott visiting a P-TECH school in Brooklyn in 2014. The former prime minister was onboard with the program from the outset. *Andrew Meares*



Right: Year 9 student Stephanie Ruschin with Bendigo Bank manager and mentor Cathie Kerr-Neilson at Newcomb Secondary College, the P-TECH school in Geelong. *Jason South*

Broad political support

In backing P-TECH, Abbott was following in the footsteps of other political figures of varying ideological hues. The Brooklyn P-TECH, which launched in 2011, got its initial political backing from centrist New York mayor Michael Bloomberg.

In 2013, then US president Barack Obama praised the school in his State of the Union address and later paid it a visit. This came after Obama's former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, who went on to become mayor of Chicago, introduced P-TECH schools to his city in 2012. The Abbott government followed up with funding for two pilot P-TECH schools in Australia, one in Ballarat backed by IBM, and one in Geelong backed by a group of businesses. Enthusiasm for P-TECH schools outlasted Abbott. Wyman says the Turnbull government's Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, has been there from early on.

"We talked about how it could be expanded, both geographically and to new and emerging industries," Wyman says.

In 2016, the Turnbull government funded 12 more P-TECH schools in a major pilot program aimed at making young people more ready for technology-based jobs in economically needy areas.

Students at a P-TECH learn specialist skills in senior high school and then stay to complete a certificate or diploma, which can lead to a degree. As in the US, each Australian P-TECH is linked to a tertiary education institution.

Industry mentors

Students have industry mentors and get a view of where their vocational studies will lead them. The Skilling Australia Foundation, which Wyman heads, plays a key role in linking industry with the schools.

Wyman links his passion for building skills in young people to his own experience, when he decided against the academic path his father had taken and chose to leave school early to become an apprentice chef.

He is adamant that young people should have non-academic options open to them.

"What is wrong with leaving school and getting into something you enjoy? How many parents

True Leaders 2017 Judging Panel

			
Kate Burleigh Managing director, Intel Australia	Patrick Durkin Deputy editor, BOSS	Lindley Edwards Chief executive, AFG Venture Group	Margaret Gardner Vice-chancellor, Monash University
			
Gen George Founder, tamme	Joanne Gray Editor, BOSS	Catherine Livingstone Chairman, CBA	
			
Simon McKeon Chancellor, Monash University	Michael Reid Art dealer	David Thodey Chairman, CSIRO	

try and tell their kids, 'You have to do it this way?' Young people feel the pressure," he says. Wyman says the message he wants to give to young people comes directly from his own journey. "Education is about the right education at the right time," he says.

Importance of networking

Wyman went from being a chef to running BHP's global leadership centre. His chosen career path gave him the opportunity to network in business and he found new opportunities, including an MBA at Swinburne University of Technology.

But he increasingly saw his future not as a corporate manager, but as someone trying to ensure the real skill needs of young people were being met in a way which led to good jobs.

This eventually led him to co-found the Skilling Australia Foundation, which offered bridging programs to youth designed to lead to employment.

"We saw a gap where people needed to be able to go to employers with some basic job-readiness skills. Young people were being overlooked by employers who said, 'We really need young people who can look you in the eye and shake your hand,'" he says.

But Wyman has an even longer-term job than setting up P-TECH schools. He wants to change society's mindset and convince students and parents that quality vocational education leads to good jobs.

Judges' comment

What he has done, with the emphasis on vocational education, is really powerful.

Article online: http://www.afr.com/brand/boss/true-leaders-2017-nicholas-wyman-skilling-australia-foundation-20170915-gyi3h6?utm_source=social&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=nc&eid=social:twi-14omn0055-optim-nnn:nonpaid-27062014-social_traffic-all-organicpost-nnn-afr-o&campaign_code=nocode&promote_channel=social_twitter