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Good jobs nurtured in schoolroom

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Last week's Future Jobs forum was missing the one minister who would make the most difference to future jobs, School Education Minister Peter Garrett, *writes John Daley.*

The Prime Minister called the forum because people are worried about changes in the Australian economy. Change has been a constant. According to a recent Reserve Bank paper, about 3 per cent of Australia's workforce changes industry every five years. This rate hasn't changed much in the past 40 years, apart from a spike in the early 1980s.

Our history also shows that we maximise prosperity when government doesn't try to protect industries that are uncompetitive or facing falling demand. Australia's readiness to open its economy has been a significant competitive advantage, ultimately benefiting almost every Australian.

So far, the government has resisted the temptation to try to dictate the shape of the economy in the face of the mining boom. This is just as well.

Manufacturing is not inherently more sacred than nursing or engineering. Prosperity is not dependent on being a "country that makes things".

Instead, prosperity ultimately depends on productivity growth in every field. This may be the result of innovation – new products and services – or new ways to produce them. Either way, it depends on a well-educated workforce perpetually looking to change how things work and find a better way.

High-quality education matters because it makes people more innovative and more prepared to change. The most important government intervention is to raise the quality of education across the community. Unfortunately, while Australian school education is good, it is not great. Our systems remain well behind the best, particularly those in east Asia such as in Shanghai, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore. Fifteen-year-old students from Shanghai, on average, have two extra years of mathematics understanding than do Australian students of the same age.

The only way to improve the jobs of the future is to better educate the workforce. The evidence shows that this depends on raising the quality of teachers, particularly by evaluating them rigorously and feeding back how they can individually develop their performance.

As with any other industry, "tick a box" feedback will not work. There are no substitutes for teachers being observed directly in classrooms, and receiving regular feedback from peers and experts.

If we really want to make a difference to future jobs, the School Education Minister would have a leading role, explaining how we are going to make the tough political decisions to improve evaluation and feedback for teachers.

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