Professor Hayes has been Director of the Australian Government Institute of Family Studies since 2004. He has research and policy interests in the pathways and nurture of children and their families through life. Much of his work has focused on disadvantage, with a longstanding interest in prevention and early intervention. The impact of relationship breakdown on children is a particular interest. He has been the chair, or a member of four Australian Government Ministerial Advisory Councils, and has been internationally recognised as an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, and a Visiting Professor at European and American universities.

Comparative analyses of Australia’s educational systems show some disturbing trends. Gaps appear to be widening and differences solidifying. Arguably, the success of the “lucky country” has not been a matter of chance. It has been founded on wise policy decisions that have fostered social and economic mobility, driven largely by educational opportunity. For contemporary Australia, educational opportunity ought to be one of the key pillars of social inclusion policy. Lifelong learning, from early childhood to adulthood, provides the engine of opportunity to overcome social exclusion. The presentation examines international approaches to social inclusion, with particular reference to the UK and the EU. However the crucial task is to identify the needs and challenges that are specific to the Australian context. Gradients in developmental and educational characteristics of children will be examined as a function of their social addresses, using the results of Growing up in Australia: The longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and comparative analyses of OECD data. Australia must build its social inclusion agendas on what has worked, avoid the problems that others have encountered and ensure that access to educational opportunity squarely underpins its efforts. Failure of social inclusion weakens societies and ultimately results in divided nations that squander their diversity of talent and ability.