Education Services Australia

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Consultation Paper – Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

August 2023

1. Introduction

Overview of Education Services Australia

Formed in 2010, Education Services Australia (ESA) is a not-for-profit company owned by all Australian education ministers with a strategic objective to deliver safe and effective education solutions that support excellence and equity in education. ESA's work enhances teaching and learning for all students, including those students experiencing educational disadvantage.

ESA works in collaboration with all Australian education jurisdictions to provide technology-enabled education resources, tools and services that advance nationally agreed education initiatives, programs and projects.

In the context of a dynamic education landscape and increasing reliance on digital technologies, ESA works closely with stakeholders to ensure that our products and services are valued for their practical and effective contribution to quality teaching, and student learning experiences and outcomes.

ESA response

ESA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* (the Review) *Consultation Paper* (Consultation Paper), which builds on the findings and recommendations of other recent reviews, reports and initiatives including the Productivity Commission's *Review of the National School Reform Agreement*.

ESA also supports the opportunity for this work to inform the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) and bring the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* to life.

This submission draws on ESA's experience as a partner within the Australian education sector, and recent observations made in relation to other relevant reports and reviews. ESA's response focuses on practical opportunities to positively impact the lives and learning of Australian students.

2. Improving Student Outcomes

Improved educational outcomes have a positive impact on a range of social, health, employment and income benefits, but there are persistent challenges for some students in reaching their full learning potential and achieving strong educational outcomes.[1]

To ensure equity and excellence in education for all students, the Review seeks input into evidence-based approaches which improve student outcomes.

Increased emphasis on co-design with educators and community

It is ESA's view that, wherever practical, the initiatives contemplated to support the next NSRA should include an increased emphasis on co-design and move beyond consultation as the default approach to the design, development and implementation of solutions.

In particular, the next NSRA should include opportunities for co-design along with place-based policies, particularly amongst priority equity cohorts – including students facing historical, cultural and systemic barriers such as low socio-economic status students, students with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.[2]

Co-design has the capacity to create innovative ideas to improve systems, services, and solve complex problems.[3] Amongst other benefits, educator and end-user participation in policy design processes leads to a sense of ownership, which benefits implementation. Implementation will be significantly more achievable if the design process has been informed by practical insights of how systems operate and impact on the end user/s.

The co-design approach recognises that the 'success of reforms centred on improving student outcomes [is] contingent on parental and community engagement'[4], and the methodology can be used to develop comprehensive, quality-assured curriculum and assessment materials which the Review identifies as one possible mechanism to improve student outcomes.[5]

ESA's recent partnership with the Stronger Smarter Institute to deliver the Australian Government's English Language Learning for Indigenous Children (ELLIC) trial is an example of a project involving a co-design methodology to deliver high quality resources for the purpose of enhancing student outcomes. It also reflects the Review's requirement for resources and curriculum materials to promote inclusion of First Nations students, by authentically and respectfully referencing First Nations perspectives and ways of learning. The ELLIC trial aims to improve English literacy outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preschool children for whom English is an additional language or dialect. The project involves developing a series of play-based apps for children in the year before full-time school, together with resources for educators, families and communities that are aligned to the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum: Foundation.

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[1] Australian Government, *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper*, July 2023, p.11.
[2] Ibid. ESA also notes that the Review acknowledges that many students within these groups also achieve excellent educational outcomes across a range of measures.
[3] Safer Care Victoria, https://www.safercare.vic.gov.au/news/co-design-a-powerful-force-for-creativity-and-collaboration
[4] As above n 1.
[5] Ibid.

Similar success has been achieved in the development and delivery of Western Australia's Yikan Noongar project. Yikan Noongar is designed to be taught by a Noongar language teacher or a Noongar person (with a classroom teacher as a co-learner with students). The program is the product of extensive co-design in partnership with community. The program materials have been endorsed by the Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation and the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council and is being used in over 40 schools across Noongar Country in WA's south-west. When fully implemented, it is expected that approximately 515 schools on Noongar Country are most likely to use the materials.

A further example of successful co-design approach comes from the development of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). Sponsored by the Australian Government, ESA undertook co-design with teachers, principals and data managers to bring consistency to valuable and informative data about the adjustments needed to support disability in the classroom. ESA worked through case studies, developed e-learning courses and created simple tools to ensure the data collection is now consistent.

Based on these examples, ESA suggests that prioritisation of co-design approaches is also likely to support the Review's intent to link future NSRA commitments to existing commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021 – 2023.

Supporting student pathways to work and further study

In relation to the Review's questions regarding important student outcomes, ESA notes the findings of the *Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training.* In addition to academic achievement, it reflected on the importance of education providing students with the essential attributes required for lifelong learning and preparation for active citizenship in a democratic society and purposeful engagement with the labour market.[6] Professional career guidance at school was identified as an important step in supporting these outcomes and ensuring students have informed choice about their future pathways.

Is it ESA's view that there is an opportunity to help promote these outcomes, and address gaps in career advice, exploration and experience, through digital technologies. Expanding the purpose, reach and use of *myfuture.edu.au*, the national career guidance ecosystem for schools will play a significant role in assisting career practitioners, students and their parents to navigate the changing world of work and further study.

Work experience is a critical mechanism for allowing students to explore career pathways. It helps inform subject selection and develops students' employability skills; however, participation in work experience is heavily influenced by geographic location, existing networks and availability of places. Disadvantaged students, particularly those with smaller community

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[6] Peter Shergold, *Looking to the Future – Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training,* June 2020, p. 12.

networks due to geographic location, socio-economic factors or recent relocation to an area, may have limited opportunities compared to students with broader community networks in urban areas.

A student who is passionate about digital technologies and cybersecurity, who is located in regional Queensland, is more likely to obtain work experience in retail or agriculture, rather than in an industry where their enthusiasm lies. This student may not have genuine agency to explore an aspirational post-secondary pathway, and an urban employer may miss an opportunity to promote their industry to a future employee. Even in urban areas it can be difficult to obtain work experience in an area of true interest, with many students obtaining positions in their parents' workplaces. Most students have only one work experience opportunity during the senior secondary years, so getting a taste of variety of workplaces is difficult.

After gathering a deep understanding of the requirements and needs of policy makers, department coordinators career practitioners, students and parents in a discovery phase, ESA has established that a national platform that connects Australian school students with selected virtual work experiences will significantly enhance the opportunities for at-risk cohorts. The program would be designed to cater for individual student aspirations, regardless of location or socio- economic status.

Recommendations

- That the Review recommend the inclusion of a commitment that, wherever practical, co-design processes will be used to develop policy and program initiatives to help deliver better outcomes.

- That the Review recommend a renewed investment in ensuring all students, including equity cohorts, have access to high-quality, evidence-based digital career and pathways information.

3. Improving Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Review identifies an opportunity for the next NSRA to improve student outcomes through an enhanced focus on student wellbeing, with the Productivity Commission noting that a 'greater focus on wellbeing might also provide opportunities for greater collaboration across Governments, portfolios and school sectors.[7]

The Review seeks feedback on how to best support mental health and wellbeing in schools.

Nationally consistent definition of student wellbeing

ESA supports an increased focus on student wellbeing in the next NSRA which builds on the current acknowledgement that it 'is fundamental to successful education outcomes'[8].

ESA believes that establishing a shared understanding of national wellbeing indicators is required to achieve this aim. This is consistent with the Review's reflection that a lack of agreed 'definitions, indicators and measures' is detracting from the capacity to capture national data on student health and wellbeing. It would be beneficial to establish a nationally consistent definition of student wellbeing for the purposes of measuring the effectiveness of current interventions or programs aimed at improving student health,[9] and linking support structures for student wellbeing.

Social and emotional skills have been found to be good predictors of educational outcomes and educational outcomes have been shown to impact social and emotional wellbeing. For example: resilience and optimism are traits that make it easier to cope with difficulties such as social isolation or feelings of insecurity; intellectual curiosity and creativity lies at the heart of a young person's motivation to learn and explore new ideas; the willingness to cooperate, trust and accept others is crucial for children and young adults to be able to fully and meaningfully participate in their education; and our students need to be able to think independently and take responsibility. Individual wellbeing is the foundation from which we develop these important traits and capabilities.

If we accept that social and emotional wellbeing is aligned with resilience, optimism, trust, motivation and self-confidence, we can lift wellbeing to identifiable skillsets that we want to develop in Australian students.

Nationally consistent data collection processes and systems

The development of an agreed definition of student wellbeing would allow the collection and analysis of data to inform policy and supports. There is an opportunity for national education agencies, including ESA, to be called upon to obtain design data collection processes and systems to both support national consistency, and minimise the administrative burden on jurisdictions and the education workforce.

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[7] Productivity Commission, *Review of the Natonal School Reform Agreement Interim Report*, September 2022, p. 21.
[8] Council of Australian Governments, *National School Reform Agreement,* 2018, p. 4.
[9] Above n 1, p. 24.

The benefits of data collection include outcomes measurement and performance monitoring, with robust wellbeing data also having the potential to produce an important early warning system. Quality early warning systems collect data directly from a school or groups of schools, including enrolment demographic information, assessment results, records of disciplinary events, library activity, attendance, participation in extracurricular activities, and wellbeing surveys, among other sources. These systems can communicate findings and data in ways that identify which students are at risk, and which factors contribute to that appraisal. A well-designed system will recommend specific actions and provide resources to ensure interventions are appropriately timed and targeted.

The NCCD collection, referred to earlier, provides a relevant example for a potential approach. That model, and its associated support resources have improved the quality of NCCD data and improved teacher understanding of the adjustments available to support students with a disability. Importantly, it achieved this through an equitable and accessible format, informed by a detailed co-design process which could be replicated to support broader student wellbeing goals.

Use of digital technologies to deliver interventions and resources

In addition to data collection, there is also an opportunity to amplify access to student health and wellbeing interventions through effectively designed digital technologies.

Digital tools and solutions can help teachers, students, parents and carers respond to short to medium term wellbeing issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, through the sharing of high quality and consistent resources. Digital technologies also support teachers and schools by providing a platform for practitioner engagement and learning via webinars and other forums, as well as deliver longer term professional learning designed to reflect and deliver recent research on wellbeing topics, such as resilience.

One example of such technology includes ESA's Student Wellbeing Hub which provides quality assured materials on a freely available website. Greater investment in digital technologies of this nature would allow a more significant curation of quality resources from a range of experts in the future.

Recommendations

- That the Review consider opportunities for the next NSRA to incorporate an explicit focus on student wellbeing backed by data collection, analysis and targeted actions.

- That the Review recommend Australian Governments establish a nationally consistent approach to data collection and analysis to inform policy and program needs to support student wellbeing.

- That the Review recommend the development of a national strategy for supporting student wellbeing to guide investment in the development and curation of evidence-based resources that support teachers, students and parents to respond to individual student's wellbeing needs.

4. Our Current and Future Teachers

Recognising the significant impact that teachers have on student outcomes, the Review seeks views on ways to mitigate current challenges in teacher recruitment, retention and working conditions.

ESA agrees that education technologies have an important role to play in improving the social status and relative attractiveness of the teaching profession, supporting teacher to develop and hone their expertise as practitioners and reducing their administrative burden. Education technologies can help inform, complement and supplement good teaching practice, and support teachers to develop expertise and personal connections with their students.

Tools to support teacher attraction and retention

Education technologies can help unlock dynamic solutions to the challenges of attracting and retaining a high-quality teaching workforce.

A technology-rich teaching career assists in changing perceptions (and misperceptions) many prospective teachers hold of the profession. The opportunity to integrate mature and emerging technologies as part of a highly rewarding teaching career would give pause to pre-existing notions on the status and relative attractiveness of the profession. Technology can help elicit curiosity on how the contemporary classroom has changed and continues to evolve.

Digital tools could also play a vital role in reducing the obstacles that prevent many mid-career professionals from transitioning to teaching.

Improving the working environment of teachers and school leaders

Supporting teachers by expanding access to quality assured, curriculum linked digital resources and lessons

ESA believes that there is a timely opportunity to include an objective in the next NSRA which reflects the Grattan Institute's recommendation that Governments and sector leaders ensure "all teachers have access to a suite of high quality, comprehensive curriculum materials."[10]

Teachers report that quality digital teaching and learning resources are increasingly hard to find, as they exist in multiple hubs, portals and often require subscription fees to be paid meaning that they have to visit several locations daily to find the resources they need to complement their teaching practice. According to those teachers surveyed, an average of 8.7 hours each week is spent on lesson planning and preparation. Any streamlining of this process would significantly reduce workloads and potentially increase job satisfaction, and bring about better educational outcomes for students.

Renewed national effort aimed at supporting teachers by facilitating access to a refreshed and expanded bank of quality assured, curriculum aligned teaching and learning resources is required. The national collection will be carefully curated to ensure the resources included are

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[10] Jordana Hunter, Amy Haywood and Nick Parkinson, *Ending the Lesson Lottery – How to Improve Curriculum Planning in Schools,* Grattan Institute, October 2022, p. 11.

aligned to curriculum; that they contain high quality content; and that any inferred practice or approach is evidence-based. This will help support use of evidence-based practice and reduce the risk that students are exposed to content or practices that will not improve learning.

Data shows that up to 40% of teachers are teaching out of field and many students spend up to a year of their schooling taught by casual relief teachers. The national resource collection can be deployed to assist where these workforce challenges are present as well as to provide support for schools and systems as they navigate disruptions to schooling.

Further reductions in teacher workload can be achieved by bringing all publicly funded, high-quality digital learning resources into a single one-stop search aligned with the Australian Curriculum for teachers, parents, and students. This would improve the discoverability of existing publicly funded, quality-assured, curriculum-linked digital learning resources to save teachers' time and ensure equity and accessibility for all teachers

Investment in expanding this national asset to incorporate a complete set of modelled lessons, consisting of videos of teachers using evidence-based practice to deliver lessons for all areas of the curriculum, along with lesson plans, slides, assessments and other related resources would significantly enhance the initiative.

Harnessing digital technologies to enhance teacher impact and improve student outcomes

A significant opportunity offered by well designed and well used education technologies is to assist teachers by supporting them in making judgements about their student's progress and to enable differentiated teaching and learning that will support student progress.

Consultation with teachers across an extended period demonstrated that the concept of a teaching tools network, that is a group of interconnected and aligned information technology systems that function as a unit, would provide significant benefit by providing:

- a national bank of quality assured formative assessments

- synthesis of assessment and observation data into existing dashboards to accurately show student progress

- an AI driven recommendation function that connects student progress to options for next steps and potentially useful resources form which teachers can select.

Ensuring Artificial Intelligence is well designed, well used and well governed

In the interests of our students, Australia needs to take a strong policy position on shaping the design, use and governance of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in our schools.

Australia's education ministers have taken an important first step on the path to harnessing AI-enabled education technology products the development of an evidence-informed, best practice framework for Australian schools to guide the use of generative AI tools. However, AI enabled education technology products are already commonplace in classrooms and sustained effort is required to ensure that students are not exposed to ethical and privacy risks.

Ethical risks arising from the inherent bias contained within the datasets used to train AI models, the generation of misinformation that appears credible and the creation of content that

undermines individual autonomy by manipulating thoughts or emotions can have serious consequences for students and society. Privacy risks associated with collection and use of sensitive personal information without consent, the misuse of student data and increased risk of data breaches all put the privacy and safety of young people at risk. Establishing frameworks and governance arrangements that ensure AI-enabled edtech products comply with Australian Privacy Principles and information security standards, ensure transparency and are accountable is critical to minimising potential harm.

Another significant risk is that educational disadvantage is not amplified by an accelerating digital divide as those with the resources and knowledge to effectively harness AI-enabled reap the benefits while others are left behind. If we allow the usage of these emerging learning technologies to be concentrated in more advantaged schools we will see existing equity gaps widen. The next NSRA has the opportunity to ensure that equity underpins the design, access and use of AI enabled edtech and to monitor the impact of these tools on equity across educational settings.

AI-enabled education technology can become a powerful tool in creating a more equitable and effective education system that benefits students and teachers. However, the risks associated with the misuse of data, perpetuating biases and undermining the role of educators, cannot be ignored.

Recommendation

- That the Review recommend renewed national investment to support teachers through the development and curation of quality assured, curriculum aligned teaching and learning resources that promote evidence-based practice and reduce teacher workload.

- That the Review consider opportunities to support teachers through the development of a network of teaching tools that synthesise assessment data from multiple sources, including teacher judgement, show student's progress and assist in identifying evidence-based interventions to positively impact learning progress.

- That the Review highlight the importance of national collaboration in the design and deployment of AI-enabled education technologies to ensure equity and safety are paramount.

5. Collecting data to inform decision making and boost student outcomes

ESA agrees that the collection and publication of data are critical to the achievement of Australia's goal of an excellent and equitable education system. Key to this ambition is the establishment of a National Education Data Architecture which is critical to improved data collection, sharing, analysis and protections for the benefit of Australian students, educators and education organisations.

The data architecture would establish a nationally agreed set of rules, policies, standards and models that govern and define the type of education data collected and determine how it is used, stored, managed and integrated across schools, states and territories and national organisations.

The benefits of establishing an agreed National Education Data Architecture include:

- Facilitation of a high quality, accessible national evidence bases to assist improved research, inform policy development and priorities.

- Improved decision-making in school education and the shaping of education policy and programs with higher quality information, data and evidence available to educators, policy makers, researchers and the community.

- Access to standardised sets of data about school education that would be otherwise distributed across many different data repositories with many different data owners and custodians.

- More efficient collection of data and the sharing of data that currently occurs through individual data sharing arrangements.

The Unique Student Identifier (USI) is an important piece of enabling infrastructure for realising the benefits of effective use of education data to measure outcomes and drive improvements in student outcomes across all cohorts.

Recommendations

- That the Review recommend the establishment of a National Education Data Architecture to support the achievement of policy objectives through improved data collection, sharing, analysis and protection.

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6. Conclusion

Improving student outcomes should be central to the next NSRA. To improve student outcomes, we need to support teachers and address student wellbeing which is fundamental to setting Australia's young people on a path to fulfilling and happy lives.

ESA believes that national collaboration and education technologies provide significant opportunities to support the achievement of these objectives in ways that promote equity and allow flexibility to suit local needs or specific requirements of priority equity cohorts.

Further opportunities to support, and result in better outcomes for Australian students, include:

- increased emphasis on co-design to ensure policy design processes to capture the views and lived experiences of the education workforce, school communities and students

- renewed investment high-quality, evidence-based digital career and pathways information for all Australian students, including equity cohorts

- an explicit focus on student wellbeing backed by nationally consistent data collection, analysis and targeted actions to inform policy and program needs

- development of a national strategy for supporting student wellbeing to guide investment in evidence-based resources that support teachers, students and parents to respond to individual student's wellbeing needs

- renewed national investment in the development and curation of quality assured, curriculum aligned teaching and learning resources that promote evidence-based practice and reduce teacher workload

- development of a network of teaching tools that synthesise assessment data from multiple sources, including teacher judgement, show student's progress and assist in identifying evidence-based interventions to positively impact learning progress

- national collaboration in the design and deployment of AI-enabled education technologies to ensure equity and safety are paramount

- establishment of a National Education Data Architecture to support the achievement of policy objectives through improved data collection, sharing, analysis and protection.

ESA submits that the Review provides scope to consider how collaboration across the Australian education sector can deliver positive outcomes for students, including through the support of national agencies like ESA and other partners.

ESA thanks the Review Panel for the opportunity to respond to the Consultation Paper and looks forward to participating further in the process to deliver better outcomes for all students, and teachers.