



Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Faculty of Education – University of Melbourne

Response to Consultation Paper

2nd August 2023

The Faculty of Education (FoE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. We recognise the complex task the Expert Panel has as it seeks to develop recommendations to inform the next NSRA.

We strongly endorse the need for a central focus on equity as a means for system improvement and acknowledge the importance of the Commonwealth Education Minister’s commitment to working with state and territory governments to put schools on a path to full and fair funding. This commitment is integral to ensuring all young Australians have a fair go in our education systems.

As the Expert Panel develops its work ahead of its final submission to the Education Ministers by October 31st, the FoE encourages further public conversation concerning the selection of areas of focus identified in the consultation paper. The Terms of Reference and scope of the review are very tightly defined, targeting specific areas of reform interest, but no explanation is provided to explain how or why these areas have been determined as more important than other potential areas, such as, for example, elevating First Nations approaches to education or environmental sustainability. While we do not dispute the importance of the reform areas identified, to better align the review process with the principles and practices of democratic governance and collaborative consultation in public policy processes (see, for example, Ansell and Gash, 2007; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015; Savage 2021; Sørensen and Torfing 2005), we invite further debate and clarity concerning the ministerial determination of areas of reform.

The following sections respond to some of the questions identified in the consultation paper as well as commenting on broader related themes and concerns. The sections are aligned with each of the chapters in the consultation paper.

2: Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

Coherent and holistic approaches to improving educational outcomes for Australian students require all students to be understood from a position of strength and potential, not deficit. While the consultation paper highlights that all students should be treated with respect, the next NSRA should make a commitment to ensuring educational structures and system design reflect this commitment to diverse student populations and their educational journeys. Recent research undertaken by the FoE in partnership with the Northern Territory Department of Education has shown that conceptualising students' education as a coherent learning journey from birth to year 12, rather than bifurcated into stages of schooling can lead to improved outcomes for students. Consequently, a Continuity of Learning Framework was piloted in the NT in 2022. While understanding the core dimensions that support continuity of learning is vital to placing students at the centre of schooling, in order for such an approach to be implemented at the national level, the next NSRA would need to consider the resourcing required for each student to experience a coherent learning journey, the systems needed for robust data sharing, and the investment required in teacher professional learning.

Approaches to understanding how Indigenous students experience Australian education systems must begin with the position affirmed by the Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting in its submission to the Productivity Commission that 'Indigenous students are not inherently disadvantaged by being Indigenous' (IECM, 2022, p. 3). Datasets of student educational attainment are often viewed through the lens of student underachievement rather than foregrounding systemic failure to address inequality. This perpetuates a deficit narrative of the individual Indigenous student, who is presented as disempowered and incapable, maintaining the long history of misrepresenting and downplaying Indigenous culture and achievement (Hogarth, 2017). Systems and schools would benefit from shifting the lens from the perceived underachievement of 'priority equity cohorts' to developing strategies and interventions to alleviate issues of inequity. In this vein, nation-building projects like Ngarrngga at the University of Melbourne are actively working to support educators and systems to embed Indigenous knowledge in their teaching and learning (Ngarrngga, 2023). Crucially, this provides an opportunity for Indigenous students to see themselves, their cultures, and their values respected, while showcasing to all Australians the achievements and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Australian society. Rather than perpetuating the deficit narrative, we call for the next NSRA to foreground strategies to combat systemic inequality by creating education systems that meet the needs of Indigenous students.

It is integral that the next NSRA considers measures beyond academic performance, and that if targets are set in relation to these measures, they must be transparently reported on. As well as the highlighted areas of school attendance and engagement, other potential areas include civic participation and sustainability learning. On the latter, UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development platform suggests that learning about climate change, biodiversity loss, and inequality can 'enhance the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions of learning' (UNESCO, 2023a). Conversely, anxiety about the climate crisis is severely and negatively impacting the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians (Gao et al., 2023). We would welcome an acknowledgement of the importance of responding

to the global climate crisis through engagement in sustainability education as part of student outcomes in the next NSRA.

School attendance is crucial to measure, but it must be measured in a meaningful way. While data on school attendance exist and distinguish between authorised and unauthorised attendance (AITSL, 2019), there is a need for national approaches to data collection and analysis that provide a nuanced understanding of problematic and non-problematic absence and include typologies of non-attendance. Furthermore, there is a hidden crisis of school-age children detaching from the formal education system in Australia (Watterston & O’Connell, 2019). There are no national data tracking the quantity of detached students or the impacts of detachment across the life course. We strongly encourage the panel to examine options for making flexible schooling arrangements more widely available across Australia, especially for students who are not prospering in mainstream schools due to low attendance, poor engagement, or complete detachment (Watterston and O’Connell, 2019).

While some new measures and targets could be productive, we stress the need to acknowledge risks and avoid potential unintended consequences. As well as potentially deepening existing issues with teacher workload, as the panel notes, creating new measurement frameworks always contains the possibility of creating opportunities for ‘gaming’ targets, particularly when rewards are attached to their achievement (Lingard and Sellar, 2016). We encourage the panel to carefully analyse the incentive structures set up by new systems of measurement at the classroom and school levels, and to weigh potential gains against risks.

While there exists a range of evidence-based practices for teachers to draw upon, school leaders and teachers must take sufficient account of their immediate context to ensure that they are meeting the needs of their cohort. A risk of designing evidence-based approaches to underpin a nationally coherent reform agenda is that such attempts can obscure the fact that the diverse schools and systems across Australia might be better suited to adapt and adopt *different* bodies of evidence in response to reform challenges (Savage, 2023). Even when systems and schools are working towards shared targets, *how* they get there (i.e., their roadmap and processes) is unlikely to be the same for all. There are major risks associated with the development of national evidence repositories to guide practice. If such attempts are to be made, evidence should be accompanied by clear caveats about the need for the navigation of evidence to be viewed through a contextual lens. This need for careful consideration of context when engaging with evidence has been noted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2022). Rather than asking what ‘the’ evidence should be, which can imply that a singular evidence base might be appropriate for all, we instead recommend that the panel consider ways to encourage effective evidence use and literacy amongst diverse schools. We note here the extensive work conducted by colleagues leading the *Q Project* who have sought to identify ways that systems can support the effective use of research and evidence (see, for example, Rickinson et al., 2023). There is also a need to find new ways to extend the awareness of recently developed ‘evidence tools’ for use by school leaders and teachers, such as the ‘Evidence decision-making tools’ produced by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO, 2023). We also note here work currently being done by academics in the FoE to work with state governments to design innovative professional learning opportunities for school leaders that foreground the development of ‘evidence literacy’, such as the *Leading Future Learning* program developed in conjunction with the South Australian government.

3: Improving student mental health and wellbeing

There has been a dramatic increase in the production of evidence-based programs aiming to improve student mental health and wellbeing (Berger et al., 2020), but a clear definition of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘wellbeing outcomes’ has not yet been established. Current definitions vary, and there is concern in scholarship that the distinction between wellbeing and mental health is blurring (Bache et al., 2016; Hascher et al., 2021; Haslam & De Deyne, 2021; Jackson & Haslam, 2022; Svane et al., 2019). Definitions of wellbeing are often very broad, such as the one used by the Productivity Commission, whereby wellbeing is defined as “the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively” (Huppert, 2009 p. 137 cited in Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 138). While wellbeing initiatives are often employed to prevent mental ill health, the two concepts are distinct, with mental health more often conceptualised through a negative lens and related to illness (Jackson & Haslam, 2022). One could therefore have mental ill health while maintaining positive wellbeing, or vice versa (Haslam et al., 2021; Keyes, 2002). Developing a clear understanding of these distinctions and issues is crucial if wellbeing is to play a key role in the next NSRA and is therefore used to evaluate educational outcomes.

Understanding the impacts of context (especially in terms of school environment, cultural shifts, and socio-economic status) is integral if student mental health and wellbeing are to be improved. Research on the efficacy of wellbeing programs has resulted in the identification of evidence-based options, but significantly less is known about the contexts and conditions that may influence the uptake, operational capability, and sustainability of different programs within schools (Higgins and Booker, 2023; Novins et al., 2013; Owens et al., 2014; Rowling and Samdal, 2011). For example, there is strong evidence supporting ‘whole-school’ and ‘ecological’ approaches (Long et al., 2021) and ‘social and emotional learning’ approaches (Runions et al., 2021; Seligman et al., 2009; Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020), with the former emphasising the cultivation of a culture of belonging and wellbeing at the school level and the latter focusing on the promotion of positive social behaviours. The transformation of school environments can therefore require structural reform to ensure wellbeing programs are not experienced as ‘add-ons’ (Cahill, Dadvand, & Gowing, 2021).

The suggestion made in the consultation paper that students might be surveyed to create a ‘wellbeing indicator’ could aid in understanding the effects of socio-economic context on wellbeing and may positively impact the ability of schools to implement wellbeing initiatives. However, as noted above, this would require precise and clear definitions of wellbeing and mental health to be established that are sensitive to the needs and conditions of diverse equity cohorts *and* those definitions would need to be shared and understood by students. We note also that scholarship suggests that the destigmatisation of mental health amongst young people has already created issues with determining levels of mental health and wellbeing (Critchley et al., 2018; Lindholm & Wickström, 2020). Survey approaches to measuring wellbeing already exist in Australia (e.g., the Young Minds Matter report from Goodsell et al., 2017), and a new national Voluntary Mental Health Check tool is under tender. These survey approaches are limited by accessing a single point in time. Mental health crises are deeply time-sensitive, meaning that an indicator produced annually may be insufficient for understanding trends in student mental health. These approaches also tend to be ‘one size fits all’, in that they do not address the diverse needs

of students from equity cohorts and assume that the mental health and wellbeing of students in the school environment at a particular time is an accurate depiction of inner lives inside and outside of school. Digital technology provides an opportunity to achieve a more personal and agile degree of monitoring in a scalable form that is more likely to be engaging for students, and which can be tailored for marginalised groups (National Digital Mental Health Framework, 2020). Smartphones are now ubiquitous within school populations, and several evidence-based mental health and wellbeing monitoring apps are now well validated for young populations (e.g., Rickard et al, 2016). This could provide a more powerful data set for schools to assess their students' wellbeing if concerns around ethical data governance are adequately addressed.

Barriers to improving wellbeing and mental health are only built higher by the burden placed on teachers to respond to the crises of students on top of their existing work. This is exemplified in the quantity of requests for help in identifying and supporting student wellbeing from Australian educators across all sectors and jurisdictions (AERO, 2020; Howard, 2019; Jung et al., 2011; Lynagh et al., 2010). Improvement is needed in connecting teachers and schools with specialist mental health support agencies in consistent and predictable ways through 'boundary spanners' who provide leadership equally responsive to and embedded in health and education, as this work is too often being left to individual educators (McCuaig et al., 2019). Promoting mental health literacy through engagement with specialised agencies like Headspace and Beyond Blue and elevating the visibility of practitioners with lived experience of mental ill health is imperative if students are to recognise their own mental ill health and act swiftly to seek help (Orygen, 2020; Simkiss et al., 2023). We encourage the panel to critically consider the capacity of teachers and the possibilities for linking education practice with health when developing NSRA targets around mental health and wellbeing.

4: Our current and future teachers

Reconceptualising and resourcing the teaching profession across the whole of career is core to attracting and retaining of teachers. Much has been written about the need to affirm teaching as a profession (Goodwin, 2012; McBeath 2012), particularly in the context of world-wide teacher shortages (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). Yet, more is needed than affirmation, or incentives to move educators to hard-to-staff contexts (although we maintain that appropriate remuneration is essential). For the past two decades, initial teacher education has been extensively reviewed and presented as the panacea for improving teaching quality and student outcomes (Savage and Lingard 2018). However, this approach fails to acknowledge the ways in which teacher knowledge continues to be developed in practice and is targeted to the needs of student cohorts in the context in which the teacher is working (McLean Davies et. al. 2022). As noted above, research undertaken by the FoE has drawn attention to the educational dimensions that must be considered for diverse students to experience continuity of learning in their unique contexts. Similarly, a teacher's career must be considered as a continuous learning journey, with various pathways possible for progression, which include genuine pathways that enable teachers to remain classroom focused. Existing career frameworks often reward excellent teachers through administrative and leadership positions. There is a recognised absence of career options for teachers if they want to 'progress' with regards to seniority and remuneration, which allow them to remain proximate to the classroom.

The report identifies teacher workload as a major concern, and this needs to be addressed in ways that remain sensitive to school contexts. A common refrain is that teachers need pre-prepared resources made available to them to lessen workloads (e.g., Hunter et al., 2022). While this can potentially be valuable, the work of contextualising these resources for immediate use is understated in arguments for such resources. Further, we do not believe that commercial or other resources can serve as a substitute for high quality professional learning which enables teachers to build capacity and knowledge. Teachers need time to plan and collaborate with their colleagues and time to engage with the evidence that they are collecting to plan for future teaching. Allowing teachers to build knowledge and ensuring that they have the agency and autonomy to engage reflexively with their practice and meet the needs of students is integral to reducing workload pressure. This not only applies to improving student outcomes, but to improving the wellbeing and mental health of students, which, as we note above, is an increasingly onerous part of teaching and can impact the mental health of teachers themselves (Adams et al., 2023; Fray et al., 2022; OECD, 2023; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2018). We argue there is a need to reimagine how schools and teachers relate to one another to support wellbeing, reflexive practice, and professional learning. Moreover, considering innovative ways to support teachers working in disadvantaged schools is required if they are to remain in the profession in the long term. This may involve exploring differentiated teaching approaches that address the context of the cohort in the school, as well as new workplace arrangements like job sharing classrooms, nine-day fortnights, and funded sabbaticals.

UNESCO's recent Global Education Monitoring report cautions against relying on digital technologies to alleviate teacher workload and improve effectiveness (UNESCO, 2023b). We encourage the panel to engage with these international debates concerning the appropriate role of educational technology. The UNESCO report is the result of intense consultations across national contexts, and highlights that many technology-mediated innovations are contingent on students being able to self-regulate their learning, as well as have access to ICT equipment at home. If structural issues correlated with access to technology and digital literacy (e.g., structural inequalities including entrenched disadvantage) are not addressed, then technology can be detrimental as it reinforces divisions amongst students, causing additional workload for teachers. This does not mean that technology should not be used, but instead that it should be treated as a potential magnifier of both inequality and teacher workload issues, with potential impacts that must be carefully monitored.

5: Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost future outcomes

Education scholarship based on international comparative data suggests that four themes characterise improvement of education systems: system-wide approaches; investing in the human capital of teachers; creating bridges between macro governance and micro enactment; and plentiful resources (Barrenechea, Beech & Rivas, 2022). This research shows that quality data can play a powerful role in informing system monitoring and change, but data alone cannot serve as a 'silver bullet' for informing decision-making or improving outcomes. We note the strong emphasis in the consultation paper on data and measurement and recognise that such areas of focus are appropriate in relation to the aims and scope of the NRSA, but we emphasise the need to view data generation and use as one of multiple

potential policy levers that can be utilised to drive improvement. As high performing systems such as Singapore demonstrate, data can play a role in shaping reform but should not be the primary steering force (Ng, 2017).

While there is an abundance of data on schooling, there are issues with how it is produced and used.

For example, as noted above, attendance data in Australia is not generated in ways that enable governments to understand the types and levels of non-attendance. As we have argued, intervention for attendance needs to be aligned to typologies that distinguish between problematic and non-problematic forms of absence. Current data collection methods do not enable schools to respond in a way that is informed by data, nor do governments understand the types and levels of non-attendance occurring. Similarly, recent trends in assessment research suggest a condition of data richness, but information paucity, meaning that data is produced without the capacity for using it effectively, particularly in classrooms (Hopfenbeck & Lenkeit, 2018; Stiff et al., 2023). Part of the professional learning for teachers mentioned above should be their integration into systems for producing and using assessment data and other forms of data in education. Data literacy therefore needs to be built amongst educators.

6: Funding Transparency and Accountability

We strongly agree with the identified need to establish new mechanisms to ensure that the public funding of schools is delivering on national agreements and that all school authorities are transparent and accountable to the community for how funding is invested. The nature of school funding in the Australian federation means that while the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) provides a consistent measure for determining Commonwealth funding for schools, the diversity of models subsequently used by Approved Authorities to calculate and determine funding to schools results in no clear line of sight to understand how Commonwealth money flows to most schools. To better hold Approved Authorities accountable for the use of public money, we endorse the need for new initiatives, which at a minimum should include the need to make easily accessible to the public the models used to distribute funds to schools. We see potential in establishing an accessible public website where such information can be housed and where existing models can be compared.

While we strongly endorse the need for greater transparency and accountability with regards to the Approved Authorities, we see potential risks and unintended consequences associated with introducing school-level requirements to report on how funding is used to support the students it is intended for. The primary issue with introducing such requirements is that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for school leaders across highly diverse schools, to show in exact and reliable terms how money is being used to support the students for which funding is intended. Schools in different sectors and jurisdictions will be subject to different reform priorities and initiatives which might not be easily comparable and measurable, especially at the national scale. It would be very difficult to show how money is used to support specific elements of a system-level reform agenda. For example, even within the same jurisdiction and sector, one school might choose to invest in a literacy program for all students, whereas another school might introduce a program to target a specific equity cohort, while another school might introduce a wellbeing program. In all cases, students in need may benefit from the activities in place but will benefit in different and not directly comparable or measurable ways. Requiring

schools to report activities against reform initiatives may lead, therefore, to school leaders arguing that anything or everything is an example of money being used to support the students for whom it is intended. In such circumstances, there would be little value in adding new and potentially difficult and time-consuming reporting requirements to the already extensive list of responsibilities that school leaders are required to perform.

While we understand that the SRS is not targeted as part of the review process, we strongly welcome consideration and debate about the exclusion of the major related issue pertaining to the 80/20 and 20/80 funding splits between federal and state/territory governments. While the proportion of government funding provided by federal and state/territory governments in relation to the SRS is a political concern, it is also a policy concern that directly affects the capacity for jurisdictions to pursue priorities associated with the NSRA and will remain a major factor moving forward under a new NSRA. As clearly documented in the bilateral funding agreements associated with the current NSRA, there are deep funding inconsistencies and inequalities across the nation, with jurisdictions on different timelines, especially with regards to the pursuit of funding government schools closer to the 100% recommended by the SRS. We note that current bilateral agreements show most independent schools are already funded at 100% of the recommended amount, demonstrating clear inequalities between government and non-government sectors. This is a policy issue as well as a political issue, because if new nationally consistent reform initiatives and targets are set, but jurisdictions and sectors are unequally placed to resource the pursuit of those initiatives and targets, then this compromises the likelihood of consistent success across the nation. When recommending new initiatives and targets for the next NSRA, we therefore urge the panel to consider how current funding differences across jurisdictions might either enable or limit the pursuit of such aims. A major risk is that initiatives and targets are set assuming jurisdictions and sectors are equally placed, given they are currently not, and because it is unclear if, or when, such equality might be achieved.

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