



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Deakin University  
Submitting as a: Academic person or institution  
State: Vic.

### Summary

#### Recommendations:

Achieving excellence in educational outcomes for students in Australian schools requires leadership. Deakin University provides the following recommendations for the Australian government, to be implemented in partnership with other stakeholders, including Universities:

- Work closely with school systems, governments and educational researchers to inform and focus attention on a broad range of knowledge and skills in education policy, as the appropriate preparation for the work and society of the future.
- Emphasise the development of assessments that are useful for diagnostic purposes and that support and enhance the professional judgements of teachers.
- Re-focus national tools such as NAPLAN and MySchool to improve education at the system and school levels, rather than at student level, and so that these issues can be further investigated and supported by the school review process. In this way, the Government can lead a broader and more comprehensive range of measures at the system, school and student levels to show how schools are meeting their obligations under the Melbourne Declaration.
- Work with university teacher professional education and systems to provide a sustainable and effective approach to enhancing teacher professionalism, and to address chronic issues of teacher retention through professional development, including mentoring for early career teachers.
- Establish strong partnerships that facilitate cooperation across the education systems, schools, communities and families to improve student learning.

- Establish a dedicated research fund similar to the NHMRC and as proposed by the Productivity Commission (2016).

## Main submission

Australia has a high quality and innovative education system, with dedicated, professional teaching staff. However, there are some problems facing the system, mostly concerning the growing inequalities between schools and distortions imposed by some of the accountability regimes used to test the effectiveness of the system.

The Melbourne Declaration summarises the breadth of outcomes that Australia expects from its education system. Beyond excellent literacy and numeracy skills and workplace readiness, students are expected to develop empathy, compassion, a commitment to learning, intercultural understanding, as well as social and personal wellbeing.

The complexities and diversity of the needs of students and schools across Australia's education system means that there are no simple solutions to achieving educational excellence. Deakin University's responses to the questions raised in the review paper follow.

Question 1: What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

- (a) What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

The Australian Curriculum provides the basis for rich and rewarding educational experiences for students, and addresses the goals of the Melbourne Declaration. It provides teachers opportunities to incorporate 21st century skills, inter-culturalism and global citizenship, as well as deep disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and a wealth of extra-curricular activities and knowledge. Deakin University argues that developing strong practices that build positive schooling experience and student learning outcomes, including contributing positively to society and employment, can unfortunately be interrupted by narrow interests that focus on accountability regimes.

Given the fast changing world, educators and administrators must move beyond mechanical or narrowly framed conceptual responses. Educators should provide students with the dispositions and skills needed to grow as empathetic and compassionate citizens with a love of learning and an ability to remain involved in education throughout their lives. Active citizens need to have the capacity to listen to and learn from those around them, assess arguments and to state their views with reason and conviction. Education is a shared responsibility of communities, focused on developing citizens capable of participating in our democracy and armed with lifelong learning skills, intellectual and emotional resilience, and a broad knowledge base within and across core disciplines.

- (b) How should school quality and educational success be measured?

Measures of school quality should include student attainment of the benchmarks and progression points in the Australian Curriculum, the state of infrastructure within schools and its fitness for providing innovative learning

environments, and the level of parental and community participation and involvement.

Simple measures alone do not provide a rich understanding of educational success or school quality. Assessment is of primary importance as it has the most power to guide educational success.

An unintended consequence of NAPLAN is its use for purposes beyond what it is validly able to measure (Wu 2011), especially in relation to the productions of school league tables. While acknowledging the role NAPLAN plays in potentially identifying struggling schools, the MySchool website, for example, is not delivering on its intended purpose – which was to drive school improvement. Arguably, it can contribute to schools focussing on ‘teaching to the test’ so that their NAPLAN results are seen as the primary evidence of their school achievements.

Any issues identified by NAPLAN with particular schools should be addressed directly with the school and informed by more comprehensive internal and external assessment mechanisms. School reviews that are thoughtful and made by an informed committee would provide a more nuanced and complete understanding of the health of particular schools, and could then be used to provide on-going support to those schools.

In addition, the error margins of NAPLAN results can lead to highly misleading assessments of student performance and of school outcomes (Wu, 2011). As the results are used to compare schools, any misleading readings can damage school reputations, and potentially have a distorting effect on public perceptions of educational purposes and education practices.

The common characteristics shared by successful students are a love of learning, curiosity, enjoyment of and ability to persist with difficult puzzles, and a commitment to deep knowledge and ways of thinking achieved by working within and across disciplines. In addition, the capabilities education should foster are a deep commitment to social justice, the ability to articulate and debate complex issues with clarity, and to understand and engage with views students do not agree with. Compassion, the ability to empathise, to recognise and stand against prejudice and injustice, to look beyond oneself to the good of society, can be sidelined in curricula and sacrificed for ‘workforce readiness’ and competition, yet these are the capabilities most urgently needed.

If assessments are to improve student learning, they must be designed with the purpose of providing diagnostic information to teachers and schools. Such assessments need to be timely and relevant to the specific context of the learning situation for them to have an impact upon the pedagogical decisions made by teachers in their classrooms and schools more generally. A rich array of such assessment tools and strategies are available to teachers, and teachers need to be well-educated in their use.

The education community must avoid providing children with early assessment feedback based on tests such as NAPLAN that positions them as poor learners. One of the keys to educational success is a belief in one’s own abilities. Social stereotypes

and being constructed as ‘failing’ can become self-fulfilling prophecies that prevent children in accessing pathways shortly after their educational journey has begun.

Question 2: What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

- (a) How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students? What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes? What evidence is there to support taking these actions? What works best for whom and in what circumstances?
- (b) What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place to ensure ongoing identification, sharing and implementation of evidence-based good practice to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time?

Improvement of the complex Australian education system will require time and investment of human resources and capital. After 40 reports into education by various governments over the last decade (Mayer et al 2017), there remain no ‘low-hanging fruit’ that will spontaneously improve student outcomes. Improvement should be seen as an ongoing endeavour and not as a single problem to be solved.

Most of the problems having an impact upon the Australian education system are related to growing inequality within the system, including an increasingly segregated school system. Research has shown that more equal societies perform better across a wide range of social indicators (Stiglitz 2013; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Other research has confirmed these findings in relation to education (OECD 2013; Teese and Polesel 2003). Increasing social equity has been shown to produce a dramatic improvement in a nation’s PISA rankings (McGaw 2008). Finding the means to measure and improve social equity across the Australian education system is key to improving outcomes more generally.

The early years of a child’s life are recognised as the time when the foundations are laid for future learning. High quality, play-based, early childhood education programs run by a qualified workforce provide significant long-term benefits to children and have a dramatic impact upon their educational trajectory, especially for children considered at-risk, from vulnerable backgrounds, or experiencing disadvantage. The current Australian Government investments in early childhood education should be continued and expanded to ensure all children have access to quality programs that cater for a diversity of learners.

Responsive and supportive relationships between young children and their families are also conducive to children’s learning outcomes. Parental/carer engagement in early childhood programs enhance children’s achievements. Supporting parents in their role as their child’s first teacher is essential due to the significance of a child’s first five years for the development of important academic and social skills and abilities.

Schools belong within communities and enhancing the involvement of schools in their community, and the local community in schools, has been shown to improve

student engagement and motivation to learn (McGregor et al 2017). It also does much to address and forward the core social aims of the Melbourne Declaration.

Students have complex and diverse learning needs and identifying these needs requires professional teachers working together to find the best means to promote students as active learners. The Australian Teaching Standards (AITSL 2011) make it clear that becoming a highly accomplished teacher requires significant time and experience. Yet, early career attrition in the teacher workforce is a key deficit of the Australian education system, which hampers the efficiency and effectiveness of the system. The casualisation of the workforce (Mayer et al 2017) has a negative impact both for teacher retention and for the development of early career teacher pedagogical practice. More needs to be done to support and mentor early career teachers to improve the effectiveness of the whole system. Early career teachers with fulltime teaching positions are more positive about their career and more likely to remain in teaching (Mayer et al 2017). There are currently perverse incentives in the system that encourage schools to increase their reliance on casual staff. These incentives relate to short-term financial benefits in employing early career teachers as temporary staff, but as A Class Act (Commonwealth of Australia 1998) explained two decades ago, the short-term gains available from the casualisation of teachers are quickly overridden by the negative impacts on morale, turnover and the esteem with which the profession is held.

Students are keenly interested in their own education, but they are rarely given the opportunity to voice their preferences in what or how they should be taught. Where they are given this opportunity, it leads to improved engagement and student attainment (Mills and McGregor 2017). Curricula and school practices should be framed to encourage the personalisation of learning.

Truly effective teachers are teacher-researchers, who engage in action research to improve student outcomes in the highly situated practice of teaching and learning. Universities should have a larger role in providing teacher professional development for the skills necessary to undertake effective action research.

Schools are sites where a community of highly committed professionals seek to improve the learning opportunities enjoyed by their students by engaging in evidenced based practices applied within the context of their learning situation. Policies and improvement schemes should be assessed according to whether they facilitate or undermine such an understanding of the professional nature of schools and school staff.

The complexity and location of teaching delivery means that strategies and teaching plans assumed to be universally applicable are generally less effective than is assumed.

- (c) How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved to help drive educational achievement and success and support effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment?

There are no simple solutions to the questions posed in this report, certainly none that can be affected by new targets and standards. What is necessary is a recalibration of the system away from some current practices of accountability to those that increase teacher professionalism and student learning.

Deakin University is concerned that a focus on targets and standards can lead to support for 'high impact' strategies promoted as panacea, but that have less support or scientific warrant than their proponents claim. Such strategies encourage faddish solutions to complex problems. Australia has experienced a decade of highly regulated and data driven measurement systems, and yet this has produced few gains in educational attainment even within its own terms.

There is a particularly urgent need to broaden the targets and standards associated with education in Australia so that they incorporate means of assessing the full range of goals mandated under the Melbourne Declaration, rather than the narrowly conceived notions of literacy and numeracy. The assessment of the quality and success of the education system must incorporate measures of community participation, community and student health, parental education, parental involvement, the adequacy and use of funds, teacher satisfaction, school completion rates and inclusion, all of which are known to have an impact upon the quality of education available.

- (d) Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing? What are they and how could they be further developed?

Actors within the school improvement space have sought to promote 'scientific' strategies that mirror clinical medical models, presenting these as appropriate for educational interventions. The promotion of 'ten-point improvement plans' of effective teaching techniques based on effect sizes derived from meta-analyses are then imposed on teachers as the means to produce large gains in student improvement. The scientific warrant for such plans has received severe criticism in the educational research as being overly mechanistic when applied to teaching, which is a deeply cultural and interpersonal interaction.

While many of these strategies do constitute part of the practice of professional teachers, their use can only make sense within a coherent pedagogy applied by a reflective practitioner. Without such a pedagogical position, it is impossible for teachers to know if or when these 'high impact strategies' are appropriate. There is no shortcut to teacher professionalism. Teachers become effective within a learning community of other teachers focused on enhancing student learning. Teaching is contextual and situated, this is overlooked in the improvement literature.

Improvements to education in Australia could be enhanced if the focus moved to measurements that recognised that system-wide factors impact upon school and student success and failure. The education system needs to find ways to encourage more cooperation across and between schools. Australia should seek to create educational communities larger than the local school and find means to facilitate teachers sharing and learning from the practices and experiences of fellow professionals.

Question 3: Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

(a) If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

Many of the systems for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the education system at present are based on competition between schools, which, it is assumed, should lead to a more effective and a higher performing system. This constructs the education system as being composed of individual schools seeking to expand their market share. In a system with a fixed number of students, this invariably amounts to a zero-sum game of winners and losers (Jensen 2013).

Understanding what makes the difference in education requires building an evidence base of high-quality research. For this reason it is essential that a dedicated research fund be established, similar to the NHMRC and as proposed by the Productivity Commission (2016).

Recommendations:

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