



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

Submitter: Social Ventures Australia
Submitting as a: Other
State: NSW

Summary

Australia should aspire to an education system where children have an equal opportunity to access high quality education and to develop the skills and knowledge to be able to participate fully in the community.

Education success is larger than traditional academic attainment and includes the capabilities needed to confront global challenges and thrive in a changing labour market.

Australia must also improve our 'learning productivity' with continuous improvement models supported by a new national and independent evidence broker based on a modified version of the UK's Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Evidence for Learning (E4L). This would support and empower school leaders and teachers to embrace and engage with evidence to better inform their decision making.

The Australian Government should:

- Fund an Australian Education Evidence Broker (the Broker) equivalent of the EEF (costed at \$150 million over 10 years based on the size of the Australian education sector relative to England)
- Conduct an open tender to operate the Broker
- Provide the funding as an endowment to secure its long-term success and independence.

The Broker should:

- Provide a platform for evidence sharing/collaboration between the States and Territories including coordination of a research agenda and cross-jurisdiction trials
- Complement not replace existing State structures – providing more or less support where needed

- Maintain an open, free, and regularly updated collation and synthesis of international education evidence for use by teachers, school leaders and policy makers alike
- Assess the strength and quality of evidence of existing and new programs
- Develop teaching and practice guides on high-impact interventions
- Commission (but not conduct) high quality research trials and translations in line with the research agenda

Fund organisations working closely with schools to drive the effective use of well evidenced approaches.

Main submission

Social Ventures Australia’s (SVA) education vision is an Australia where children have an equal opportunity to access high quality education and to develop the skills and knowledge to participate fully in society, regardless of their background.

A number of interconnected policy responses are needed to achieve this vision. One crucial element is to develop a robust ‘education evidence ecosystem’ which generates continuous improvement in schools, systems and policy. SVA has outlined the characteristics of what we consider this to be in our previous submissions to the Productivity Commission.

This submission focusses on the need for an Australian Education Evidence Broker to fill a gap within our education system to drive evidence informed practice and policy. Having looked at international systems, SVA created Evidence for Learning (E4L) two years ago to pilot an Evidence Broker in Australia. Having proved the model, a solution is now needed at scale.

Educational success is wider than academic success. It includes development in non-cognitive domains (such as motivation, perseverance, empathy and positive self-regard) as well as the general capabilities beyond the knowledge domains; as set out in the Australian Curriculum including Critical and Creative Thinking and Intercultural Understanding. This is essential to the future economic participation of Australian children in a changing labor market.

Educational success is developed through both formal learning environments (early learning, schools, TAFEs, tertiary education) and in home and community environments. Strategies to achieve education excellence and equity must operate in and across both environments. A rich learning environment at home helps children reach cognitive development milestones, and have better reading, vocabulary, general information and letter recognition skills – all factors that contribute to educational attainment. There is also the involvement of the wider healthcare,

family and business communities that is critical to enable and support the impact of formal education for children.

At a national level, additional expenditure in education (which has been large in nominal terms but relatively modest in real, per capita terms) has not achieved the desired gains and Australian students' performance on both national and international student assessments has stalled or even declined since 2000.

Australia needs to improve the 'learning productivity' in our schools through continuous improvement processes. These need to be operating at classroom, school and system levels and be underpinned with a reliable and responsive evidence base. This will result in higher impact approaches becoming more frequently adopted and lower impact approaches more quickly retired.

While international assessments are not the only measures of success, if Australia wishes to provide children with a world-class education, including becoming a top five country over the next decade, the rate of improvement needed is significant.

SVA recommends that the Review builds on the work of both the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling and the Productivity Commission's 2016 Report on its Inquiry into the Education Evidence Base as well as the international experience of how to generate continuous improvement in the education system.

Internationally, there are different approaches to stimulating demand for robust evidence either through mandating its use or incentivising schools or jurisdictions to use evidence based approaches.

England and the United States have both attempted to lift education outcomes through the combination of these approaches. In both cases, a significant upfront investment in generating high quality research to establish 'what works, for whom, in what circumstances' has been essential to providing trusted advice to educators and increasing their understanding of high-quality evidence.

In England, the Cameron government implemented its Pupil Premium which provides £1,300 per primary school child and £900 per secondary school student for disadvantaged students. This sought to reduce the gap between outcomes for students who come from a disadvantaged background and is a similar model to needs-based funding in Australia.

Receiving the Pupil Premium placed a responsibility on head teachers to report on what information they relied upon when choosing how to spend their extra money. This generated demand for evidence services to support informed decision making.

The government also recognised a gap in their education system for a body which drives evidence uptake and commissions rigorous tests of innovations in schools. Filling this gap would ensure that additional funding was spent on the activities that were most likely to lead to the biggest gains for learners. A tender was run for the

best independent operator and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was established in 2011 with a £125 million founding endowment from the Department for Education.

The EEF is an 'evidence broker' to the English education system. It supports teachers and senior leaders by providing free, independent and evidence-based resources designed to improve practice and boost learning. The EEF does not mandate which programs schools should adopt but instead provides tools to support better decision making. It has seen great success in increasing evidence use in schools across England through generation, synthesis and mobilisation of evidence. Since its inception, the EEF has achieved impact by:

- Funding more than 150 independent trials on school programs;
- Involving 1 in 3 schools in research, including 1 in 2 senior leaders using the Teaching and Learning Toolkit to inform their decision making (up from 11% in 2011);
- Reaching almost 1 million students in 8,500 schools including 275,000 low SES students;
- Doubling the number of Randomised Control Trials (RCT) in education;
- Creating networks which supports implementation of promising programs to realise the potential gains from the results of trials in schools.

In 2015, SVA incubated a pilot evidence broker, Evidence for Learning (E4L), to adapt the EEF model to the Australian Federation and test it at small scale. E4L is currently working collaboratively with governments, agencies, professional associations, networks and schools.

Three RCTs have been funded in partnership with NSW and SA Governments and supported by the Sydney Catholic Education Office; a panel of leading Australian researchers has been established to bid to conduct the trials; a practice guide on better feedback has been developed with AITSL, and the Australian Teaching & Learning Toolkit has been 're-skinned' for Victoria and NSW Education Departments and specialist teachers' associations. This acknowledges that to get effective practice in most classrooms around Australia, we need to both stimulate demand for, and increase and improve the supply of, robust evidence.

Australia needs to be mindful of its own context. We are a small country and therefore need to draw upon the developing international evidence base of what has worked in schools to improve the learning outcomes for our students. There is already a breadth of this evidence available with over 10,000 international studies having been synthesised and published. The Toolkit, summarises the global evidence through meta-analyses of 34 different approaches (as requested by teachers) according to three simple criteria – cost, strength of evidence, months of learning

progress. The Toolkit shares evidence by providing free, online summaries with the ability to dig into the specific research the further a user goes into the site. It is designed to be simple enough to be useful but not too simplistic to mislead.

The EEF has also developed a Toolkit for early education, and Australia should consider following suit given the strong evidence that high quality early learning enables children to be developmentally ready for school at age five.

To improve and increase the supply of rigorous evidence, Australia also needs to build more specific knowledge about current education practices within Australia as this has not been prioritised in the past. In comparison to health research, education research currently lags well behind both in absolute and relative terms. Education research attracts \$470 million or around 0.5% of expenditure in comparison to more than 5% of the investment in health which has resulted in a system which drives the demand and supply of research and evidence and continuous improvement.

Widespread improvement requires a culture shift where educators and school leaders are empowered to strengthen their data and evidence confidence and recognise it as a key part of their professional role in improving learning. To achieve this requires action that is consistent and at scale – engaging large numbers of schools, teachers and school leaders.

We need better evidence of what works, for whom and in what circumstances. There is an urgent need to produce evidence that is accurate, appropriate, accessible and actionable as evidence that sits on the shelf has precisely zero impact. Australia needs a national mechanism with which to mobilise evidence through networks to bring about the change required.

SVA believes that the Commonwealth Government should foster a national culture of continuous learning and improvement through supporting an Australian Education Evidence Broker. This would produce synthesis and translation of evidence for use by teachers, principals and policy makers as well as improve practice. Building evidence, sharing knowledge and driving use of evidence by the profession and policy makers must be at the heart of this developing national culture.

While Evidence for Learning has demonstrated the EEF model in the Australian context, currently there is a gap in the national education architecture to realise the goals of this Review at the scale required to see significant improvement in education outcomes.

SVA believes that none of the existing national education institutions (AITSL, ACARA or ESA) have the mandate or capacity to determine ‘what works in schools’ (through empirical evidence generation) nor the ability to ensure that evidence-based practices are adopted and implemented with fidelity in schools and to do so at scale.

An independent Evidence Broker, based on the EEF model and recommendations made by the Productivity Commission, would play a critical but distinct role, located between research, policy and practice, supporting all functions but not privileging any of them. Its sole focus being identifying, evaluating, promoting and embedding the most effective programs and practices for schools and systems from which to use and learn.

Without this capability, it is not possible to say how the Commonwealth Government can play an active role in the education system to ensure evidence based programs are implemented at scale to improve school performance and student attainment.

Through an independent body, the Commonwealth ensures that a high quality and robust evidence capability is available nationally. It uses that capability to ensure its own investments in education are based on the best available evidence and everything created by the Broker would be freely available for use by other States and Territories. This will enable cross-border research and ensure evidence is accessible for smaller states within the federation.

States with existing evidence capabilities – like NSW’s Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) - will benefit from access to evidence from other states, the opportunity to avoid duplication in research studies on key questions, and participation in cross-border, large scale studies. Smaller states would likely require greater support from the Broker to provide functions fulfilled by organisations like CESE, as well as enjoying the benefits of a national platform.

To achieve the benefits from an evidence body, consideration should be given to both the combination of functions and the governance. For maximum chance of impact and success, SVA recommends that the evidence body should have nine key attributes:

- **Independent** –be independent of governments so there is no actual or perceived influence over the choice or conduct of evaluations and release of reports. It must be able to choose the programs to evaluate within its governance structure. Independence is critical to the evidence being trusted and adopted by educators, leaders and policy makers having confidence in the findings.
- **Transparent** –publish every finding in free and open forms for scrutiny to create an active discussion of failures. It must also show the funding behind the research, the trial design and methods and the data underpinning any findings. This encourages confidence in the institution and valuable review and critique of the work.
- **High Quality** –have an evidence standard that is rigorous to ensure credibility and effective guidance. This includes features of relevance to developmental

stage, appropriate quantitative measures and a 'causation focus' with an appropriate control or comparison group.

- **Long-term** –have sufficient funding size and period to allow for continued focus on mission (instead of on funding protection) and to signal to the sector that the cultural change to evidence-informed practice is valued.
- **Efficient** –separate evaluators from the commissioning body so that it is not a monopoly (build capacity across the sector) and can be competitive and focused on the end needs of frontline professionals.
- **Responsive** –be aware of state, territory and national governments and policies, Catholic and independent sector priorities and agendas to ensure research and mobilisation efforts are aligned and relevant to their strategic priorities.
- **Useable** –generate resources in plain English formats with easy to understand measures of impact and cost including specific implementation support to ensure insights can become actions in schools.
- **Able to leverage** –leverage government and system investment to encourage business and philanthropy to serve the national interest of a high-performing education system through further funding and support.
- **Global** –be integrated with international efforts to build a global education evidence base, including adapting promising international findings into an Australian context and sharing Australian research with the global evidence base.

Establishment through an endowment has allowed the EEF to ensure longevity (beyond electoral cycles) and the scale of the investment sent a clear signal to researchers and school systems that there would be a sustained investment in evidenced informed practice. Consideration should therefore be given to an endowment model in Australia.

We have envisaged that the Evidence Broker could helpfully provide the following functions:

1. Synthesise the current **Knowledge Base** of education effectiveness by drawing on international and national data and evidence sources and presenting it in forms that are free, relevant and actionable for Australian educators.
2. Publish **Independent User's Guides** of educational programs being promoted and sold into Australian schools. This will operate to review a program's impact on learning. This is an adapted version of models being developed in

the US by the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) and the Regional Education Laboratories (REL).

3. Manage a program of **Evidence Generation** and commission rigorous, independent evaluations of Australian education programs and practices. This will generate evidence that is empirical and causal on a program's benefit on learning, and all results will be published in simple, actionable information for educators.
4. Develop actionable, evidence-based **Practice and Implementation Guides** that provide precise elements and implementation support on key areas of school improvement. These will be practical and useable materials in the form of step by step guides, checklists and templates and will be supported by promotional campaigns to increase their adoption and use by teachers.
5. Support **Evidence Networks to drive good practice** either through education authorities or other less formal collections of schools. Implementation support services will draw on the best available international and Australian evidence about how research evidence is implemented well and will build capability to support schools in evidence use for impact upon students.

A body comparative to the EEF relative to the size of the Australian education sector would cost \$150.1 million over 10 years, noting that the EEF was established with a one-off endowment which has been 'spent down'. In the EEF's case, most of this funding has been spent in schools – particularly through funding programs that are being tested in schools, as well as resources to support evidence adoption.

Table 1: Australian Evidence Broker Impact compared to EEF

Proposed Australian Evidence Broker (10 years)/ EEF (to date)/ EEF (10 years)

schools engaged 7 760/ 7 670/ 15 250

% schools engaged 82%/ 32%/ 64%

Total schools in Country 9 414/ 24 000/ 24 000

National Government (\$m AUD) 150.1/ 216.0/ 424.0

Philanthropy matched (\$m AUD) @ 25% of national investment 37.5/ 39.1/ 106.0

Toolkit Summaries 40/ 34/ 40

Program Reviews 225/ -/ -

Research Trials 147/ 145/ 250

Practice Guides 10/ 3/ 10

Evidence Networks 67/ 20/ 75

(Schools served – 50 per network) 3 350/ 1 000/ 3 750

The Broker's greatest impact will be achieved if the Commonwealth 'pump-primed' the entity to send a signal to researchers, policy makers, school leaders and system leaders of the need to engage in evidence informed practice at scale to create cultural change within the school system.

The Broker needs to be designed to fit with the Australian federation in mind. The experience in the UK in working with Welsh and Scottish Governments and evidence from previous Commonwealth and State agreements suggests that the Commonwealth Government should avoid central prescription as a mechanism to mandate use of particular programs by other Australian jurisdictions.

There are a number of significant risks with this approach.

The evidence base is currently weak in comparison with other areas so there is risk of entrenching poor practice rather than encouraging a faster cycle of disciplined innovation in which new approaches are tested, and either scaled or spread, or wound down depending on the results.

Mandating also runs the risk of undermining effective implementation – where the focus turns to compliance rather than ensuring the approach is appropriate for the local context and continuing to measure its effectiveness rather than just that 'it's been done'.

Perhaps more importantly, the best systems internationally empower school leaders and teachers to make professional judgements informed by evidence and ask them to be accountable for their decisions – more akin to what is expected from doctors. Central prescriptions risks disempowering teachers and school leaders.

The Commonwealth can provide valuable leadership and encourage much greater transparency on the use of evidence in education, but mandating particular programs runs the risk of locking in poorer learning outcomes for Australian children.