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WORKING PAPER 21

# Getting Evidence into Social Policy:

Lessons from Australia 2007 to 2017

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# Case Study 1: Building a National Education Evidence Base



## 2.1 Introduction

**T**his chapter highlights three of the preconditions for evidence-based policy making in Australia's education sector: (i) *access to government-held data*, (ii) *complementary monitoring and evaluation models*, and (iv) *independent governance of evidence*. It tells the story of the Labor government's attempt to bring together and use the evidence needed to reform Australia's education sector, particularly the way that public funding supports schools. To build the evidence base on school performance, the Government established national arrangements for monitoring and benchmarking across the states and territories, to address what it perceived as entrenched inequalities in school financing behind the uneven student outcomes across schools.

However, this evidence was not used by either party as a basis for funding reform, and is insufficient as an evidence base to assess and address poor student performance. Thus, the Coalition government has requested the Productivity Commission to outline further reforms required to build a *National Education Evidence Base* to inform education policy and funding.

## 2.2 Building the evidence base

In 2008, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister, Julia Gillard, championed improvements to transparency and accountability to enable comparisons of schools performance across the country, stating:

“It is my strong view that lack of transparency both hides failure and helps us ignore it. And lack of transparency prevents us from identifying where greater effort and investment are needed” (Gillard, 2008, cited in PC, 2009)<sup>5</sup>.

To achieve this, Gillard secured a series of national reforms. All state and territory education ministers agreed to standardise school curricula and testing across the country. Results from the new National Australian Curriculum and National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests would be made public on a new ‘My School’ website. Launched in 2010, it provides information on student performance across every school in Australia, around 10,000 in total. Results to date have revealed marked differences between states, sectors and schools (Kayrooz and Parker, 2010).

The reforms sparked by the Labor government emerged amid a backdrop of growing anxiety that continues today about Australia’s relative performance internationally. NAPLAN and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests show that Australia’s education performance at secondary level has been steadily declining for almost 20 years. More importantly, behind these results are huge gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students. High achieving Australian students rank well above the OECD average while poor-performing students are well below (Ricci, 2015; Riddle and Lingard, 2016)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> At the time, Julia Gillard was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion.

## 2.3 The evidence was not used to shape education policy

Fundamentally, these nationwide initiatives aimed to provide the Government with data on the most in-need schools, to support funding reforms outlined in an independent review presented to the Government in 2011 by the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Known as the *Gonski Report* (after its chief architect), it sought to pinpoint the source of these issues. Compared with the majority of OECD countries, Australia has a high level of resources, but also a high level of inequity in allocation. There are three school sectors, each funded in different ways from three different sources. There are two levels of government involved, one with responsibility, the other with money. Test results reflect this policy position, resulting in considerable variation on the basis of socioeconomic status, with remote indigenous students faring worst of all. The independent expert panel concluded that poorly targeted funding was a major factor behind the failure to improve the results of disadvantaged students and reduce the large achievement gaps (DEEWR, 2011).

The new ‘sector-blind, needs-based’ funding model, if adopted, would take decision making out of the hands of politicians beholden to powerful sectoral lobby groups, and make the individual student the basis of funding. It proposed redistributing existing funding (around \$39 billion annually) to schools based on the evidence of the ‘measured need’ of individual students and schools instead of the location or type of school they attended, which had characterised funding of Australia’s education system for more than 40 years.

However, despite the urgency of the reforms to school funding structures, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard failed to convince the

<sup>6</sup> In PISA’s 2015 results, Australia ranked 10th in Science (down from 8th in 2012), 20th in Maths (down from 17th) and 12th in Reading (down from 10th). In 2000, when the first tests were held, Australia ranked 8th for Science, 6th for Maths and 4th for Reading, out of 41 countries (Riddle and Lingard, 2016).

states and territories to adopt the reforms. As a result the rigorous, national, evidence-based testing of school resourcing administered by an independent authority, a National Schools Resourcing Body, was never implemented. Instead of a process of 'building funding up from the bottom,' decisions continue to be made through COAG and are subject to considerable top-down negotiation between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Julia Gillard's eventual promise that 'no school would lose a dollar' served only to perpetuate long standing inequitable funding arrangements and increases to federal funding that she was trying to address (Boston, 2017).

As a result of Labor's failure to gain support for the Gonski reforms, and the Coalition's continued rejection of the report as an objective evidence base, private (Catholic) schools still receive a disproportionate amount of funding compared to public (state) schools. This persists despite public schools educating a larger number of senior secondary school students and disadvantaged students.. Thus, six years on, despite the evidence, the politics of school funding means that neither party has implemented the Gonski reforms.

Education policy and funding in Australia is a highly contested area and lack of commitment to evidenced-based reform has stalled progress to the detriment of Australia's most disadvantaged students. As a result, education inequality remains a pressing policy issue in Australia.

## 2.4 The unfinished education evidence agenda

As Australia's international education results continue to decline, the Coalition government has said that it is 'committed to working collaboratively with the states and territories to build a world-class education system' (PC, 2016a). The Australian Government now has at its disposal evidence which identifies students performing poorly, but still lacks national policies and programs to understand 'what works' to help them improve. To distance itself from repeated calls to adopt the Gonski

model, while still embracing the language of 'evidence' and 'needs-based funding,' the Coalition government has sought independent advice from the Productivity Commission on improving education outcomes. The Commission's inquiry into *Building a National Evidence Base* released in December 2016 sets out the capabilities for an effective national system (Box 2).

## 2.5 What is the Productivity Commission proposing?

The Commission has advised all governments to commit to advancing at three core preconditions for effective evidence-based policy making as outlined in this paper: (i) *release government-held education data;* (ii) *develop and fund a national evaluation framework, ,and* (iii) *establish independent governance arrangements.* The Commission's Terms of Reference, however, did not extend to reforms to the existing funding architecture.

### 2.5.1 A national evaluation framework is required

The Commission found that NAPLAN and the [My School](#) website have improved transparency by providing important new publicly available bodies of data to set baselines, and to benchmark and monitor the performance of schools. However, they maintain that these 'top-down' policies alone are 'insufficient to achieve gains in education outcomes.' Significant evidence gaps remain because current policies focus on evidence that provides information on 'achievement' rather than understanding what contributes to student 'gains' over time (PC, 2016a, p.2). Citing extensive research, the Commission says improving student outcomes requires complementing high-level performance monitoring data with a 'bottom-up' national evaluation framework.

The path to better education outcomes lies in strengthening the capability to identify and evaluate the policies, programs and teaching practices that work best, for whom

and in what circumstances, and applying this across the nation's school systems (PC, 2016a).

Currently, the body of high-quality research relating to the Australian education context is very small and was assessed as being below world standard. As a result, Australia has relied heavily on international evidence, particularly in the domain of early childhood education and care. This has led to the adoption of overseas models but leaves pressing questions about impact in the Australian context unanswered.

### 2.5.2 Data sharing policies need reform

To inform this evidence base, the Commission has recommended developing a national system for the collection, management and use of all education data across Australia's 10,000 schools. Tightly held government data needs to be made available to researchers to understand the impact of a wide range of policies and factors on student outcomes. However, the Commission found that Australia lacks a culture of sharing data, lagging behind other countries such as the UK and the US in granting access to administrative data. Agency-level data remains difficult to access, is not uniformly collected or is not linked to other datasets. These barriers undermine its utilisation by researchers and government as an effective evidence base.

### 2.5.3 Independent governance of evidence is essential

Effective evaluation requires another core capability, the independent governance of evidence. The Labor government did not adopt Gonski recommendations to establish an independent National Schools Resourcing Body. However, COAG has not been able to fill this vacuum and has repeatedly failed to uphold non-binding agreements reached in 2008 and again in 2013 to share data and develop, publish and disseminate evidence on what works best in schools. With this core function in providing evidenced-based advice to government still lacking, the Commission has recommended shared responsibility for funding an independent national research institution to drive the reform agenda and 'promote a culture of using evidence among policy makers and educators'.

Modelled on the UK Education Endowment Foundation and US Institute of Education Sciences, it would lead a strategic research agenda producing high-quality research through currently under-utilised Randomised Controlled Trials, used extensively in the US and UK in policy evaluation. A Clearing House similar to the one managed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare would assist in the public dissemination of evidence of 'what works' (PC, 2016a).

## Box 2: Guiding principles for establishing a national education evidence base

A national evidence base should:

- Meet the varied needs of decision makers at all levels of the education system
- Provide high-quality data and evidence to inform decisions
- Drive improved student achievement through four interconnected processes: monitoring of performance; evaluation of what works best; dissemination of evidence; and application of that evidence by educators and policy makers
- Generate benefits in excess of the costs incurred in collecting and processing data and in creating, sharing and using evidence

Productivity Commission, *National Education Evidence Base* (2016a, p.5)

However, overcoming privacy concerns remains a significant hurdle. Short-term political sensitivities have come at a cost of long-term gains for the Australian community. Across its three inquiries into data access released in 2016 – *Building a National Education Evidence Base*, *National School and Early Education Evidence Base* and the sector-wide *Data Availability and Use* – the Commission has found that privacy concerns, costs and risks are far outweighed by the untapped knowledge and productivity gains to the economy when greater access to private and public data is properly managed. However, political resolve and adequate resourcing, not seen to date, is essential to undertake the institutional, legislative and cultural change required.

## 2.6 Conclusion

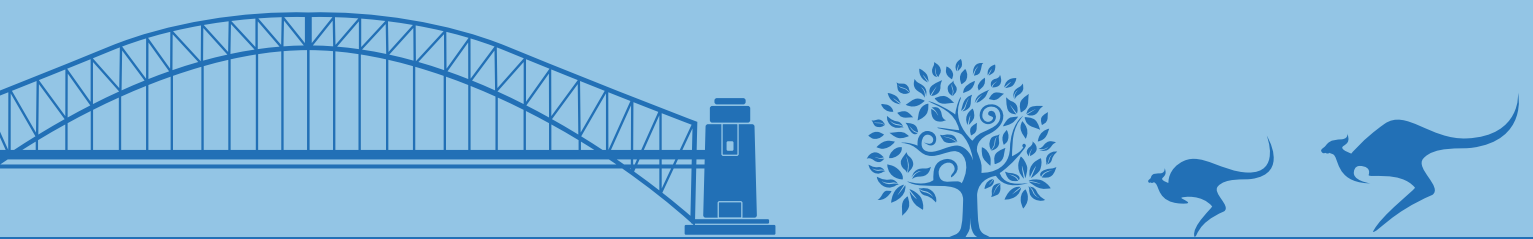
Australia's experience in school funding reform shows how clear evidence, relevant to the policy issue at hand, and conveyed forcefully to decision makers, was not taken

up. This exposes a series of key points about the dynamics of evidence-based policy making and the confluence of factors that must come together to bring about significant reform.

The Productivity Commission has called on COAG to commit to a renewed Education Agreement with *explicit* policy direction to establish a national monitoring and evaluation system. This system provides the basis for developing an education system that is fair, transparent, financially sustainable and effective at promoting excellent outcomes for all students. This model encompasses core preconditions for evidence-based policy: wide access to data as a public good; systematic bottom-up evaluation of policy impact; good governance through independent oversight of data collection and analysis; and transparent reporting to government and the public. What is needed finally, is the application of that evidence by policy makers and educators to bring about improved outcomes for Australian students.

### Postscript:

On 2 May 2017 Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a 'new' schools funding package which would allocate future funding based on assessed need, stating "This reform will finally deliver on David Gonski's vision, six years ago, after his landmark review of Australian school education." Gonski has also been chosen to lead a review to improve results of Australian students. The Coalition, under Tony Abbott and until now Malcolm Turnbull had previously planned more modest funding, and refused to embrace the final two years of Gonski. In a reverse show of bipartisan support the Labor's Opposition Leader Bill Shorten is expected to support the policy changes which will ensure consistent and increased Commonwealth funding for schools.



The Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) is a joint program between the governments of Indonesia and Australia that seeks to improve the lives of the Indonesian people through better quality public policies that make better use of research, analysis and evidence.

KSI is a consortium led by RTI International and in partnership with Australian National University (ANU), Nossal Institute for Global Health, and Overseas Development Institute (ODI).



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