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## **AARE Response to the Draft Productivity Commission Report on the Inquiry into the National Evidence Base for Education**

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft report on the Inquiry into the National Evidence Base for Education. In response to the invitation to make a written submission, the Association offers a number of observations.

The Association affirms the focus on the importance of the collection of high quality evidence in relation to education. We are also broadly supportive of the argument that a new longitudinal study of Australian children should be funded, and the Commission's call for increased emphasis to be placed on gathering evidence around the role of Early Childhood Education and Care.

Much of the report, however, is premised upon two highly problematic assumptions.

First, the draft report ignores the debates around the primacy of 'what works' in education. In our initial submission, we drew on the work of internationally recognised scholar of assessment and measurement Dylan Wiliam and his argument that "In education, 'What works?' is rarely the right question, because everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere, which is why in education, the right question is, 'Under what conditions does this work?'" (Wiliam, 2014, p.4).

We reiterate that it is essential for discussions of the national education evidence base to take the limits of generalisation across vastly different educational contexts into account, and to recognise the importance of understanding the interplay between education outcomes and local context. The argument, pervasive in the draft report, that high quality evidence of "what works" will improve education outcomes generally, is simplistic and potentially damaging. What is required is high quality evidence of good educational practice within a variety of systemic, geographical and demographic contexts, along with high quality evidence of the differing enabling and constraining factors for those practices.

Second, the draft report also ignores the highly contested nature of the argument that randomised controlled trials and meta-analyses provide the “gold standard” for educational research. Such an assumption is highly problematic in that it takes a narrow and myopic view of what constitutes good evidence in education and, if allowed to drive a national vision of the evidence base for education, runs the risk of that national vision being highly impoverished. While, as we noted in our initial submission, we do not dispute the usefulness of randomised controlled trials in particular circumstances, we are also mindful of the need for research such as this to be supplemented with evidence of different kinds that attend to the local, contextual and explanatory. The utility and appropriateness of any research method depends upon the aim and purpose of the research, and to narrow the definition of “quality evidence” to that gathered via randomised controlled trials and meta-analyses would be short sighted in the extreme. To this end, we dispute the legitimacy of the classifications of the quality of education evidence incorporated into and taken at face value within the draft report (such as those described and discussed on pages 69 and 70). It is essential that our national vision for an education evidence base be informed by a more expansive and nuanced understanding of ‘quality evidence’.

I look forward to the opportunity to expand on these observations at a public hearing later this month.

**Professor Martin Mills,  
President,  
October 7, 2016**