



National Education Evidence Base

Response to draft report (September 2016)

7 October 2016

About the National Catholic Education Commission

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education to maintain effective liaison with the Commonwealth Government and other key national education bodies. The NCEC complements and supports at the national level the work of the State and Territory Catholic Education Commissions.

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Executive Summary

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) represents the interests of over 20% of all Australian school students and is constantly engaged with the issues related to public accountability and reporting for the conduct and outcomes of schooling. In particular, the NCEC itself gathers, stores, studies, publishes and makes available data on Australian Catholic schools in a range of social, educational and school performance contexts. Accordingly, it has engaged with the Productivity Commission's project on improving the evidence base for schools through a detailed response (May 2016) to the Commission's Issues Paper. Now it seeks to respond to issues raised in the Commission's Draft Report (September 2016).

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The key issues elaborated in this detailed submission include the following:

- the need to always distinguish between data and evidence, the latter depending on how data is deployed to answer a particular query;
- the distinctive governance structure of Australian Catholic schooling, which dictates how data is collected and how it may be utilised as evidence when required;
- the ongoing and preferential importance of collaboration across already existing national entities involved in data/evidence for schools, particularly AESOC and its Data Strategy Group, which includes NCEC membership;
- the timeliness of building on the recently constructed national architecture of Australian schooling and, as part of this;
- the work to progress a single common student identifier for all Australian school students, which is timely and which will enable the further development of data linkage and longitudinal data sets that will underpin improvements in collection and use of data and the construction of evidence for all Australian schools. However, this work must acknowledge the work already under way at a state and sector level to progress student identifiers and the cost and governance implications that could arise from the national approach to managing student identity;
- the need to focus more systematically on how to measure and report on the affective domain of education, which is particularly central to Catholic schooling, namely, the moral, personal, emotional and spiritual aspects of student development;
- improving the national capacity for data linkage, that is, the capacity of one set of data (e.g. ABS Census) to illuminate another, which is particularly important for the Early Years of schooling (linking educational and health data);
- consolidating and expanding national capacity for longitudinal study and longitudinal data linkage/analysis;
- over time the technology of data collection and management will change, the privacy provisions around data will require careful attention, expectations of governments, communities and schools will increase but all the agencies involved in determining evidence on school outcomes will still need to focus on ensuring that any data meets fundamental standards of quality, integrity, meaningfulness, feasibility of collection and management.

Introduction

1. In May 2016, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) responded to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper on a National Education Evidence Base. The NCEC welcomes the opportunity to make a further submission to the Productivity Commission following the release of its draft report. This submission responds to the draft findings and draft recommendations with some general comments and provides some specific responses to the information requests.

2. Catholic education welcomes the aspiration for a national education evidence base that is wide-ranging, longitudinal and ambitious, with well-considered linkage opportunities across datasets both within and beyond the education domain. However, this aspiration has financial and administrative implications that need to be considered and managed.
3. In an environment requiring greater accountability from schools in relation to student achievement and finite resources, it is critical that education policy decisions are made based on the best evidence possible. This can operate on two levels: accessing existing research and evidence, and generating new research and evidence. Evidence in either case needs to be robust, high-quality and have practical relevance. An effective evidence base must, of course, be supported by robust data and infrastructure.
4. Given the prominence of Catholic schools across Australia, in all states and territories, and in a variety of contexts, the NCEC is uniquely placed to offer insights on some of the national challenges the draft report canvasses.

Catholic Schools in Australia

5. The NCEC is the national representative body for Catholic schools, which educate more than 760,000 (or one in five) students in 1,731 systemic and non-systemic schools across Australia. Catholic education in Australia comprises early learning centres, primary and secondary schools as well as tertiary education, including two universities. Catholic school communities are geographically, economically and socially diverse: they are located in all states and territories, in metropolitan through to very remote communities, and they educate students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Catholic schools also include a diverse range of school types, including special schools, majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and sole-provider schools.

The governance arrangements of Catholic schools in Australia

6. Catholic schools have been part of Australia’s education story for 200 years and their governance structure is characterised by a rich and diverse yet unified tradition. The principle of subsidiarity is a core principle guiding the administration and operation of Catholic education. Decision-making is delegated to the most appropriate level under this principle. The governance arrangements of Catholic education span a variety of autonomous education (employing) authorities, which comprises 25 diocesan Catholic education offices, as well as a number of “independent” Catholic schools. The employing authorities are supported by state/territory and national representative bodies (“Commissions”). For example, in New South Wales, the Catholic Education Commission NSW works together with diocesan directors, religious institutes and principal and parent associations to represent the 11 diocesan Catholic school authorities and 46 independent schools in that state. These school authorities directly manage the 543 “systemic” Catholic schools in NSW, under the canonical authority of the respective diocesan Bishop. CECNSW also works together with 46 “independent” Catholic schools, which are typically locally managed and operate under the auspices of a religious institute or other entity such as Edmund Rice Education Australia or Good Samaritan Education.
7. The great diversity of Catholic schools across Australia is a strength of our national schooling system, which serves the needs of students in a variety of geographical, social, multicultural

and multi-faith contexts. Therefore, initiatives to enhance the education evidence base should acknowledge and build on the strength of this diversity.

Leveraging the Current Landscape to Support a National Evidence Base

8. There is a substantial amount of work currently under way at a national, state, sector and school level with regard to data and evidence to support improved school and student outcomes.
9. A substantial portion of this work is collaborative across all Australian jurisdictions and sectors. Some of the work occurring at the national level through intergovernmental fora such as COAG, Education Council, AESOC and the Data Strategy Group is referred to in the Draft Report. It is worth reiterating that the proposal to develop a national education evidence base is working from a relatively strong—albeit developing—base.
10. National collaboration among education authorities around a range of projects should be acknowledged and leveraged in the process of further developing the necessary data and infrastructure to support an enhanced evidence base. These include, but are not limited to, projects such as:
 - National data stocktake
 - Initial Teacher Education and Teacher Workforce Data Strategy
 - Early Childhood data linkage and data store
 - Managing national unique student identifiers
 - National collaboration around research to support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy
 - Measuring, monitoring and reporting non-cognitive outcomes such as wellbeing and engagement
 - A longitudinal data store to support research and analysis
 - National Information Agreements for school and early years education
 - Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disability.
11. These projects have involved quite complex discussions around the governance, access and use of data. Notwithstanding the long-standing issues around privacy, these conversations attest to the greater openness and willingness of jurisdictions and sectors to work together in constructive and productive ways. This should be acknowledged.
12. At jurisdictional and sector level there is significant activity and investment in relation to building systems and processes to support data collection and its use to support evidence-building that is relevant to local contexts. Much of this work is also about making that data and evidence available to system leaders and policy-makers as well as classroom teachers and parents (often in real time).
13. There are excellent examples of innovation in this space across jurisdictions and sectors that would merit further examination, for example NSW's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) and the Tasmanian Education Department's collaboration with the ABS. The following examples illustrate some of the investment and work being undertaken within the Catholic sector:
 - ***Brisbane Catholic Education: Business Intelligence (BI) Framework.*** *Brisbane Catholic*

Education is a system of 137 Catholic schools P-12. Its BI framework provides system and school performance dashboards to support strategic conversations and empower decision-making to drive system and school improvement. The framework is underpinned by an enterprise data warehouse and data cubes comprising a range of student and staff data including student level administrative and outcomes data, finance data and other external data such as NAPLAN. The strategy is to move from descriptive and diagnostic analytics to predictive and prescriptive analytics accessible at the system, school and teacher level to drive school improvement.

- ***Catholic Education Melbourne: Integrated Catholic Online Network (ICON).*** *The ICON initiative is a collaborative program of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (CECV) involving the four Victorian Catholic Education Offices in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and the Dioceses of Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst. ICON aims to support the systemic improvement of all Victorian Catholic schools. It is designed to provide core technologies and tools to foster rich and deep student learning. Catholic education has worked with schools to further refine requirements for learning solutions that will enable schools to use data and evidence of learning to personalise learning; enable collaboration of students and teachers across Victorian Catholic education and beyond; and enable parents to have timely access to information about each of their children.*
 - ***Catholic Education Western Australia: LEADing Lights.*** *LEADing Lights is a system-wide digital transformation strategy for all Catholic schools in Western Australia. It involves the creation of a single digital ecosystem for all CEWA schools and early years centres, as well as central and regional offices. This initiative is designed to help every student achieve their full potential, every teacher deliver inspiring learning and every school become a flourishing school where students love to learn. It will also equip every principal with personal insights that enable informed decisions about the running of their school. School leaders will have access to real-time information in order to accelerate continuous improvement in student and teacher performance—improving graduation rates, health, wellbeing and achievement across a class, a school and the entire system. Parents will also have access to real-time information on how their children are tracking and how to support their learning with direct access to information, people and services.*
 - ***CENet (Catholic Education Network).*** *CENet is a not-for-profit Information, Communication and Learning Technology (ICLT) services organisation supporting Catholic diocesan education networks that connect school communities across metropolitan, regional and rural NSW, Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT. CENet's user population includes over 330,000 Kindergarten to Year 12 students, teachers and administrative staff. CENet provides a range of services to member dioceses, including an Identity and Access Management System that enables a seamless connection to CENet services and applications, and an enterprise Data Warehouse and Reporting & Analytics system that supports individualised learning in the classroom.*
14. The Education Council Data Strategy Group's annual Collaboration Forums have facilitated significant "cross-pollination" with the sharing of initiatives across jurisdictions and sectors, which in turn has supported innovation within jurisdictions and collaboration among jurisdictions around specific pieces of work.

15. In many respects the national architecture to support such collaboration has matured to a level that further progress towards a national evidence base is now timely. There is also now a significant opportunity to build on existing initiatives at national, state and sector level. The creation of an online option for the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) from 2017 will result before long in considerable data on Australian schools and form a central part of a future national data base for schools and evidence for Australian schooling.

Funding and Educational Reform

16. The NCEC notes the Draft Finding in the report (1.1) that notwithstanding substantial increases in expenditure on education over the past decade, national and international assessments of student achievement in Australia appear to show little improvement and in some areas standards appear to have declined.
17. Although funding alone will not improve student outcomes, increasing investment in education remains an important factor. This investment is more likely to yield greater returns when it is coupled with explicit evidence-based interventions and reform. In this sense, funding is a significant consideration but in the contexts of evidence, autonomy and accountability at the system and school levels.
18. Funding targeted to where it is needed most is also an important factor. Catholic education has long supported and implemented needs-based funding through its internal funding redistribution. For Catholic schools, improving student outcomes and providing quality education that is inclusive represents a partnership between the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and parents.
19. While national and international assessments of student achievement are a valuable reference, they do not provide a complete picture of students' performance and progress. Indeed, Catholic schools strive to be places that educate the whole person—intellectually, spiritually, physically, morally and emotionally. The NCEC welcomes the findings that non-cognitive outcomes are important and should be highlighted. We also welcome the opportunity to engage in a national conversation about how we might measure and report these outcomes.

Guiding Principles Supporting the Development of a National Education Evidence Base

20. The NCEC supports the principles outlined in draft Recommendation 2.1 and reiterates the important distinction between education data and education evidence. Data are an essential component of a robust evidence base, but a distinction should be made between data that are collected for reporting and public accountability, and data that are collected for public policy research and development. The NCEC welcomes a focus on data for an education evidence base that will shape policy development and improve educational outcomes.

Accountability

21. On the matter of accountability, Catholic education welcomes Draft Finding 2.1 that top-down accountability processes should be complemented by a bottom-up approach. An essential factor in improving student outcomes is the effectiveness of the interaction between a teacher and a student in the classroom. A bottom-up approach that examines

what is needed to improve educational outcomes in a nuanced way is desirable and should work together with a top-down approach.

Data Quality and Data Infrastructure

22. The NCEC notes the Draft Finding 3.1 that current initiatives being undertaken through the DSG should help to fill many of the identified data gaps. The NCEC acknowledges that there is a great deal of work already under way to develop and improve national datasets. Page | 7
23. The NCEC supports Draft Recommendation 3.1 that in assessing whether to improve the quality of existing education data, governments should examine whether: there is a need to improve the quality of the data so it is fit for purpose; data quality improvements are feasible given the context of data collection; other options are available, and; the benefits of improving data quality exceed the costs.
24. The NCEC believes that before the desired evidence base can be realised, it is important to ascertain the data infrastructure needed to support the making, collecting and sharing of education evidence. Moreover, it is worth noting that there is a raft of national projects which have already made progress in developing the data needed to build the national evidence base required to improve education outcomes for all young Australians. One of the challenges of enhancing and consolidating the national education evidence base is navigating the existing intergovernmental policy discussions and data projects already under way.
25. The NCEC reiterates its position that a coordinated national agreement on future priorities in education data is desirable and that decisions around what data infrastructure is needed to achieve the goal of an education evidence base should be made against the backdrop of existing data projects.

Ongoing Support for Existing Longitudinal Studies

26. The NCEC supports Draft Recommendation 3.2 that the Australian Government should request and sufficiently fund the agencies that conduct the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children to establish new cohorts of children at regular intervals.
27. Such longitudinal research provides a rich source of information to better understand young people and their transitions from school to post-school destinations, as well as exploring social outcomes, such as wellbeing.
28. Data linkage with early years, health and student outcomes data such as NAPLAN would usefully enhance these datasets and provide an evidence base for generating insights into areas of interest such as the intergenerational impact of disadvantage.¹ It would also potentially enrich the capacity for predictive analysis to provide insights into when different educational (or other) interventions may have the strongest positive impact on student outcomes (see pages 93–94 of the draft report).

¹ See S. Gemici & N. Nguyen, *Data linkage and statistical matching: options for the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (Adelaide: NCVER, 2013).

Administrative Costs and Compliance Burden

29. The NCEC supports Draft Recommendation 4.1 addressing the need to minimise the administrative and regulatory burden on respondents whether they be schools and/or systems by collecting sample, rather than census data, removing duplication in data collection and processing, and avoiding frequent changes to reporting requirements and/or allowing sufficient time for respondents to comply with the new requirements.
30. As the Draft Report notes, schools and their staff bear a significant burden collecting and processing a large volume of data to fulfil government requirements—a burden that is not shared equally across education systems and regions. Catholic education welcomes the Draft Report’s emphases on reducing duplication in data collection and processing, and ensuring infrequent changes to reporting requirements. As the draft report asserts, the benefits arising from a data collection should outweigh the cost of collecting and processing data.

Privacy

31. With respect to Draft Recommendations 5.1–5.5 relating to privacy and consent arrangements, the NCEC makes the following comments.
32. Privacy legislation is an important consideration when developing a national education evidence base. However, there is an inclination in the education sector to accept privacy barriers as inevitable in a way that does not apply overseas or, for example, in the health sector locally.
33. Although privacy legislation has a legitimate purpose, the limits and barriers it creates can inhibit cross-sectoral and interstate data sharing and data linkage and collaborative research.
34. Privacy legislation can also create unexpected obligations on education authorities. One example of how privacy law is an important consideration is Australian Privacy Principle 8—transborder data flow—which places greater obligations on entities in relation to the cross-border disclosure of personal information than were previously required. In certain circumstances, schools may be liable for any breach of privacy by an overseas entity in relation to the disclosure of a record of personal information originally sourced from a school.
35. As the vast majority of non-government schools are governed by federal privacy legislation, the NCEC and the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) have developed a national non-government schools privacy compliance manual, which includes a standard collection notice.² This manual is updated periodically to maintain its currency with respect to new data collections, changes in legislation and/or the broader educational environment.
36. Draft Recommendation 5.1 seems to propose the “bundling” of parental consent at point of enrolment (when collection notices are generally provided to parents). It is the NCEC’s understanding that this kind of “bundled” consent is not possible under current legislation. This has the potential to undermine the voluntary nature of the consent. Even under current consent arrangements, it is uncertain whether parents are giving consent with full understanding of which data will be shared, with whom and for what purpose.

² The manual is available here: <http://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/resources/publications/416-privacy-compliance-manual-as-updated-august-2016/file>

37. The NCEC has argued that in collections such as NAPLAN Online, parents should be provided with more information than is currently provided through standard collection notices and that this information should be explicit as to who is collecting the data and for what purpose(s), where it will be stored and for how long. Furthermore such disclosures should be provided as close to the collection event as practicable.
38. The environment within which schools and privacy legislation operate is changing and expanding rapidly. Privacy laws, and guidance for schools and educational authorities as to how best meet their responsibilities and obligations under relevant privacy legislation, needs to be responsive to the changing environment, especially in the area of technology and use of third-party applications such as Google Apps and other online collaboration and learning tools.
39. The Draft Report notes in the context of medical research there is a waiver under the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) that allows health data to be accessed without consent. The NCEC suggests that extending the arrangements relating to the collection, use or disclosure of personal information without consent (Draft Recommendation 5.2) in the education sector would require further consultation with affected stakeholders.

Metadata Repository

40. The NCEC supports in principle Draft Recommendation 7.1 to create an online metadata repository for education data collections. Further discussion however is needed around the governance of the metadata repository and its relationship to data owners and custodians. Although existing models should be examined, for example the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare model, this should not preclude a decision to adopt a new or different approach. It is also worth noting that the repository for education *evidence* is a related—albeit separate—issue. As a priority, it is important to ensure the *data* infrastructure is robust and fit for purpose. This will facilitate the research and analysis needed to build the desired evidence base.

National Policy to Develop a High-quality and Relevant Australian Evidence Base

41. NCEC supports Draft Recommendations 7.2 and 8.2 to pursue an explicit national policy effort to develop a high-quality and relevant Australian evidence base about what works best to improve school and early childhood education outcomes.
42. With respect to Draft Recommendation 8.2 to “assign an institution to be responsible and accountable for implementation” of an Australian evidence base, the NCEC supports this recommendation in principle. *If* a new entity is to be created, it is essential that it be an independent statutory entity that represents the interests of all data parties, including the non-government education sector. Further consultation on governance arrangements for any future entity will be essential.

Data Technology

43. On the role of technology in developing the requisite data infrastructure that will build a national education evidence base, the NCEC suggests learning from emerging and existing technologies in this space. In the Catholic context, some examples of technologies that

integrate data and facilitate strategic collaboration are described above and include CEnet and the Integrated Catholic Online Network (ICON).

Responses to Specific Information Requests

Information Request 3.1: *The Commission seeks comment on whether the Australian Early Development Census could be used to monitor progress against Australia's early learning objectives.*

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44. Catholic schools participate in the triennial, nationwide Australian Early Development Census. The AEDC is a useful cross-sectional population level tool that can inform policy and planning. It is not intended as a tool to track individual children over time.
45. The census faces methodological challenges. For example, the role played by teacher judgement in the AEDC and the subjective element this creates is an obstacle on the path to robust and reliable data at a more granular level.
46. The AEDC could be used to monitor progress against national early learning objectives alongside other existing datasets on early childhood experiences and outcomes.

Information Request 4.1: *The Commission seeks further information on: the costs and benefits of moving toward a national student identifier (compared to jurisdictional systems); the feasibility of using the unique student identifier system used in the vocational education and training sector to deliver more comprehensive student coverage, and; the costs and benefits of children in the early childhood education and care sector being covered by the same identifier as school students.*

47. Catholic education welcomes the DSG/ESA project to explore the feasibility of a national approach to unique student identifiers. A national student identifier system that supports data linkage and reliable longitudinal data, which can be harnessed to build an evidence base that will shape robust education policy, is a missing piece of Australia's national data architecture.
48. However, the desire for a national approach to managing student identity should not disrupt the considerable work under way at the state, territory and sector level in relation to student identity management.
49. One important step that could be taken towards a national student identifier is articulating a stronger and more cogent business case for a national approach to student identity in Australia.
50. Although the NCEC is not in a position to estimate the costs this would entail for the Catholic sector, Catholic education supports the principle that the benefits of a national student identifier should justify the costs. Catholic education will generally be wary of the costs of collection of additional data. The impact of the costs of such collections will often be greater for Catholic schools than it will be for government schools. This is, in part, because of the devolved governance arrangements of Catholic schools.
51. The best pathway to a national student identifier should not be pre-empted. Although it is worth considering the feasibility of using the unique student identifier system used in the vocational education and training sector, this may not be fit for purpose in a broader context. The long-term ambition of a national student identifier should be that it will follow a student

through her or his entire journey of education (pre-school, school, post-school destinations). In the meantime, the pathway to this long-term goal should not disrupt existing work to manage student identity.

Information Request 5.1: *The Commission invites participants to comment on the operation of the section 95 guidelines in health research and lessons for other forms of research including education.*

52. Although privacy legislation has a legitimate purpose, the limits it imposes diminishes the benefits associated with greater access to the substantial amount of education data collected. Catholic education is not in a position to comment on the operation of the guidelines under section 95 of the *Privacy Act 1988* that relate to medical research and any lessons that could be learnt in the education research context. Nevertheless, the NCEC reiterates its view that the importance of education may warrant the adoption of a model similar to that in the medical research context—a model that is robust and founded on good governance. This would require further consultation with affected parties.

Information Request 5.2: *The Commission invites participants to comment on the operation of mutual recognition in the health area and any lessons it provides for education research.*

53. The NCEC notes the Productivity Commission’s finding that most states and territories allow exceptions to the privacy of personal information for purposes deemed to be in the public interest, which enables the sharing of data containing personal information with other jurisdictions, if those jurisdictions have equivalent privacy principles. Although Catholic education has no reflections on the operation of a system of mutual recognition in health research, the proposal by the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research to apply a similar approach to multiple jurisdictional education data holdings merits further exploration.

Information Request 8.1: *The Commission seeks further information about the strengths and weaknesses of its proposed institutional and governance arrangements.*

54. A precondition for improving and further developing the national education evidence base is streamlining and modernising data governance arrangements. As the Productivity Commission notes, although there are many organisations responsible for education-related data collection, monitoring and reporting in Australia, none is responsible for evaluating what works best to improve student outcomes. Catholic education provides in-principle support for the proposal for Australian governments to establish an independent statutory body, which is accountable to the COAG Education Council, to be responsible for funding research projects. In particular, Catholic education welcomes the proposal for non-government schools, including Catholic schools, to have direct involvement in the functions of the independent statutory body. However, the NCEC notes that this new institution would have resource implications for Australian governments, which is a matter for COAG and its Education Council to consider.

Conclusion

55. The NCEC submission reiterates the view that a national evidence base should underpin public policy development and decision-making in education; it should not serve as a basis for imposing further levels of accountability on schools or become an exercise in data for data’s sake. Data are an essential component of a robust evidence base and the NCEC

welcomes a focus on national collaboration to further develop the necessary data and infrastructure to support an enhanced evidence base. The NCEC welcomes the desire to overcome barriers to data linkage, to correlate evidence available on health and social welfare, and learn from the approaches to data in those sectors. However, any temptation to use data as a comparative toolkit that ranks jurisdictions or schools and makes comparisons that are not meaningful should be overcome. Moreover, the diversity of Catholic education and its governance arrangements, as well as the potential costs of new data collections or implementing new technologies for Catholic schools, is an important consideration for Australian governments and education data stakeholders as they develop a high-quality national evidence base for education.