

University of Tasmania, Faculty of Education - Response to Productivity Commission Education Evidence Base Public Inquiry

The Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania have responded to a number of the points raised in the inquiry. Our response is as follows:

Overarching purpose

We strongly support the development of effective data collection and linkage of systems (eg. National and state databases) that provide robust evidence for decision making. Linking data across systems and states will provide the underpinning for good national policy. Currently, there are substantial barriers to linking data including different state-based legislative frameworks, access arrangements, quality of data, and so on.

The development of a longitudinal data set would make a substantial contribution to our capacity to inform policy development and practice in early childhood and school education now and in the future as well as assisting with evaluation of such.

Scope of the inquiry

We support the extension of the inquiry to include both children from birth to school entry and youth to school leaving age, whether they are attending school or not. Early childhood quality of care, opportunities and experiences are critical to developmental and educational outcomes. The collection of data that helps to identify environments, experiences and supports that underpin good outcomes will provide useful guidance to policy development for this. While the Commission's terms of reference are specific to school and early childhood education, children's educational outcomes are influenced by aspects of their lives that occur outside the educational system (as recognised by the issues related to linking data across systems). Collecting data about access to quality of childcare that was able to be linked to later outcomes, as an example, would be a useful addition to a national education data base.

The collection of appropriate data on youth who leave school prior to age 18 is also necessary. Completion of year 12 is a gateway to further educational opportunities, and understanding the choices of young people who leave school prior to this will assist in planning appropriate pathways for them. In Tasmania, for example, the University of Tasmania is working towards developing a range of Associate Degrees to meet the needs of this cohort.

The purposes to which any data are put, the access to these data and the capacity of end users to interpret the available data are both important considerations. The misuse of data, either through malfeasance or through misunderstanding, needs to be guarded against.

National data bases that collect data from every individual are very expensive and may not always be necessary. Purpose should always guide decision making on this; however, some questions of interest to government are likely to be able to be answered by adopting a stratified randomised data collection approach, or a purposively identified cohort, at considerably lower cost than that of universal data collection.

Relevant outcomes for a National Education Database

For the data collected to be of most use to the nation, outcomes that include non-cognitive domains should be included and/or be able to be linked to the educational data set. Physical and mental health data, employment (especially for those who have left school before completing Year 12) and personal characteristics are types of data which should be collected. The combination of cognitive and non-cognitive qualities should then enable appropriate support to be given to children from birth to school entry and youth to school leaving age. Parents being able to access data relating to their own child/ren could find this useful in assisting them to make choices about their future. However, this will require the data to be presented in accessible and easy-to-understand style. It is incumbent on educational training programs and systems (child-care centres, schools, universities) that everyone is able to use data appropriately.

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