



Submission to the Review of Education Evidence (Draft Report)

Introduction

The Centre for Independent Studies is a non-partisan think tank funded entirely by donations. Its research output is underlined by a commitment to individual liberty, free enterprise, limited government and the rule of law. CIS has been at the forefront of education policy-making for nearly two decades. Our research on school and early childhood education relies on publicly-available data, and aims to contribute to policy discussion by using data and evidence.

The Review of Education Evidence (Draft Report)—the ‘Draft Report’—provides a useful, up-to-date overview of the types of data collected about the educational progress and outcomes of Australian children and students. It makes salient points about the quality and accessibility of research and data.

This submission offers comments on several of the findings and recommendations.

Part 1 – Data, accountability and reporting

Issues addressed: Draft Findings 2.1 and 3.1

The Draft Report’s statement that national data alone are insufficient to achieve improved outcomes is correct. There is a need for research that allows cause and effect to be more confidently ascribed. School and classroom level research—especially randomised control trials—provide this evidence.

However, national data collection protocols can drive improvements if designed and implemented appropriately. The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is an example of this. The Draft Report’s summation of the result of the implementation of the PSC does not accurately represent its positive impact.

The Draft Report briefly describes the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (PSC) implemented in schools in England since 2012. The Australian government has proposed to introduce a similar assessment.

A 2015 data report produced by the UK government shows that since the PSC was introduced, a number of literacy and equity measures have improved substantially.¹

1. An increasing percentage of students has achieved the threshold score each year since the first national implementation, from 58% in 2012 to 77% in 2015. This indicates that phonics instruction has become more effective.
2. The proportion of students who did not achieve the expected standard in Key Stage 1 (end of Year 2) reading has decreased by 30% since the PSC was introduced—from 15% in 2011 to 10% in 2015.
3. Performance in the PSC strongly predicts performance in Key Stage 1 tests. Only 1% of students who reached the threshold score in the PSC went on to achieve the expected level at Key Stage 1 reading.

4. The attainment gap associated with disadvantage in Key Stage 1 reading has decreased from 15% to 10% since the PSC was introduced.

The Draft Report also refers to the “teaching of ‘nonsense’ words”. The inclusion of pseudo words (phonetically decodable words that are made up words, such as *fip*) was initially controversial but is an essential element of the test. Pseudo words cannot be taught as such—they can only be read by children if they have learned phonics well.²

A Year 1 phonics check would be a highly useful addition to the national assessment system as it would provide an earlier identification of students who are struggling with this foundation reading skill. It would also identify schools and systems where phonics teaching is not effective.

Part 2 – Early childhood

Issues addressed: Information Request 3.1; Draft Recommendation 3.2

The Australian Early Development Census is not, in its current form, appropriate to keep track of early learning goals. The AEDC is completed through Foundation year teachers scoring children on a scale of 0-10 (0 the lowest; 10 the highest) on each of the five domains. These scores are then used to assess whether children are developmentally vulnerable (below the 10th percentile) or developmentally at-risk (between the 10th and 25th percentiles). Progress is tracked for successive collections based on the 2009 benchmark. This makes AEDC useful for tracking change over time, and for illuminating differences in developmental state between different sub-groups of young children.³

However, given scores are based on teacher reporting rather than being standardised, and assessments of ‘vulnerability’ are similarly normed to the population rather than standardised, AEDC statistics in themselves do not constitute a clear measurement of achievement of early learning goals. Furthermore, if the AEDC is intended to be used as an indicator of progress, a baseline measurement must also be taken. This would require substantially altering the AEDC.

This also highlights why the Commission’s recommendation for another round of LSAC is a good one. As LSAC allows for the collection of a whole range of information relating to family, demographics and—crucially—exposure to formal and informal early learning, this provides a high quality dataset for researchers working in the early childhood space.

Part 3 – Privacy and access

Issues addressed: Information Request 4.1; Draft Findings 5.1 and 6.1; Draft Recommendations 5.1 – 5.5

The Draft Report finds that although much data is collected by relevant departments and agencies, there are impediments to its use. One specific example the authors of this submission have experienced concerns data sourced through ACARA. The research report, *One School Does Not Fit All*, contains charts generated through ACARA data that show the distribution of government funding, total funding, and ICSEA scores across the three school sectors.

The original intention was to graph the relationship between ICSEA scores and government funding with respect to the school sectors. However, this goal was not realised: even though the MySchool website’s school profiles present both sets of information, it is not possible to source from ACARA a spreadsheet containing both school finance and ICSEA score data. For such a large dataset, manual matching was not a realistic prospect and this constituted an impediment to effective use of the data.

The authors would generally support liberalisation of access to educational data for the simple reason that such transparency is vital to accountability. However, it is also important that private information—and pieces of information that are detailed enough to identify individuals—is stored securely. This is crucial for the quality and integrity of the information accessed by researchers, as it relies on a degree of faith and confidence from the public.

Part 4 – An Australian evidence base

Issues addressed: Draft Recommendations 7.1, 7.2 and 8.1; Information Request 8.1

An online metadata repository is necessary given the diversity of bodies and agencies that collect and make available educational data, and it would be a great contribution to the development of an education evidence base.

The concerns raised by the Commission in relation to expertise and quality of research and evaluation, within the public sector and within academia, match the experiences of the authors. Particularly with regards to the public sector, the state of affairs observed in the Draft Report relating to evaluations not being publicly available (to say nothing of their quality and rigour) is mirrored in other, related, areas of policy.⁴

There is merit in the Draft Report's recommendation that Australian governments should pursue a national policy effort to drive the development of an Australian evidence base. Of the pathways identified in the Draft Report, a tender system—similar to that implemented by the UK Government with the Education Endowment Foundation—is the superior option. This is largely because it would circumvent jurisdictional issues (if the function were merely folded into an existing federal agency), as well as the observed problems of expertise within individual departments and a tendency to make research and evaluations difficult to access.

However, there are still questions about what the function and mandate of this particular agency may be, and a research clearinghouse is not as straightforward as it sounds.

As the Draft Report identifies, it should be the joint responsibility of all Australian governments. In practice, given the difficulty in finding agreement on other contentious issues relating to education policy, such as funding, this may be difficult. There is also the issue that determining which research to include in a clearinghouse necessarily requires judgement. The US 'What Works' Clearinghouse has attracted criticism because its classification system overplays the findings of one small randomised control trial (RCT) versus the findings of numerous studies that aren't RCTs but still have validity.⁵ This can skew the findings heavily. The Education Endowment Foundation in the UK has also been criticised for its interpretation of the evidence on feedback and marking.⁶

These issues are not insurmountable, but require serious consideration before moving forward with such a proposal.

Conclusions

The Draft Report is a valuable contribution to the discussion around the use of evidence in education policy and practice. It makes a number of findings and recommendations that have merit.

However, there are some issues where the Final Report could be enhanced with more detail. The Draft Report in its brief summary of the proposed Year 1 Phonics Assessment understates the positive impact of its UK counterpart, the Phonics Screening Check, in shifting outcomes for children, as well as its usefulness as a screening method to identify where children are struggling and where teaching is below par.

This submission argues that the Australian Early Development Census is not a useful tool against which to benchmark the success of Australian early learning goals. While the Draft Report outlined the paucity of evidence relating to early childhood education, it did not highlight exactly how parlous the state of evidence really is. The biggest policy change in the history of early childhood education, the National Quality Framework, was not backed by evidence of its impact, much less evidence that it generated benefits in excess of costs.⁷

While taking a 'What Works' or clearinghouse approach to building an evidence base has great promise, it is important the Commission be aware there are problems that must be learned from. The nature of high-quality and relevant evidence is contested, between different stakeholders as well as potentially between federal, state and territory governments. This is not insurmountable but must be accounted for in any policy response.

Author details

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¹ UK Department for Education (2015). [Phonics screening check and national curriculum assessments at key stage 1 in England, 2015](#). Statistical First Release.

² Castles, A., Coltheart, M., Larsen, L., Jones, P., Saunders, S. & McArthur, G. (2009) 'Assessing the basic components of reading : a revision of the Castles and Coltheart test with new norms', *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, Vol. 14:1, pp. 67-88, DOI 10.1080/19404150902783435

³ Jha, T. (2016). *Early Childhood Intervention: Assessing the evidence*. Research Report 19, The Centre for Independent Studies. P 6.

⁴ Jha, T. (2016). *Early Childhood Intervention: Assessing the evidence*. Research Report 19, The Centre for Independent Studies. P 13.

⁵ Carter, M. & Wheldall, K. (2008). 'Why can't a teacher be more like a scientist? Science, pseudoscience and the art of teaching. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 32, 5-21.

⁶ Didau, D. 'A marked decline? The EEF's review of the evidence on written marking'. The Learning Spy, May 18, 2016. <http://www.learningspy.co.uk/assessment/marked-decline-eefs-review-evidence-written-marking/#more-9445>

⁷ Jha, T. (2014). *Regulating for Quality in Childcare: The Evidence Base*. Policy Monograph 142, The Centre for Independent Studies.