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Introduction

Over the last five years the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has established itself as part of the English schools ecosystem. Over one quarter of schools have been engaged in our programmes and over two thirds of head teachers use our resources. Analysis undertaken by the English Department for Education found that the direct lifetime productivity gains for pupils receiving EEF interventions, before accounting for the significant benefits of our dissemination and mobilisation work, will amount to three times the costs of running and evaluating those interventions.

The EEF is keen to share what we have learnt from our first five years of work – and we are at the vanguard of efforts to collaborate internationally on building the evidence base in education for the benefit of pupils in all countries. We were delighted to be referenced in the Commission’s report, *The Education Evidence Base*, and pleased that our Chief Executive, Sir Kevan Collins, was able to discuss our work directly with the Commissioners. We are keen to build on our input to date and offer our perspective on some of the specific issues arising from the report – particularly how our independence, underpinned by the funding model of an endowment, is fundamental to our success and our capacity to work across all parts of the evidence chain.

In preparing this response, we are conscious that while there are many similarities between the two nations, the English and Australian school systems are different, and a federal system brings particular opportunities and challenges. Here we offer some insight into our own experience; it is of course for the Commission to decide how much to read across to the Australian context.

Background

In its report, *The Education Evidence Base*, the Productivity Commission makes the recommendation that:

“The Australian, state and territory governments should pursue a 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. In particular, five activities need to be supported:

- *development of research priorities*
- *commissioning of high quality education research*
- *adoption of rigorous research quality control processes*
- *dissemination of high quality evidence*
- *development of researcher capacity.”*

The Commission also sets out three broad options as to where the institution fulfilling these functions might be housed:

- incorporating it into an existing institution
- creating a separate government owned institution
- creating a new, privately run institution through a competitive tender process, similar to the way in which the UK Education Endowment Foundation was established.

Based on our experience of the English system and our role as the UK's What Works Centre for Education, we wholeheartedly support the Commission's analysis of the education evidence challenge - and particularly the need for 'bottom up' capacity in the system to meet those challenges. As well as the functions of that entity, it is right in our view that the Commission considers the appropriate governance arrangements – those most likely to lead to the production of robust, credible research which has the maximum likelihood of influencing behaviour in the classroom.

It is here that that the experience of the EEF – and the benefits of our innovative structural model - might be especially relevant.

The creation and structure of the EEF

The creation of the EEF in 2010/11 coincided with both an agenda of austerity in public finances following the financial crash, and the introduction of a dedicated per capita premium (the pupil premium) which was attached to children from certain disadvantaged groups. Alongside this, more power was being devolved to head teachers to make spending decisions in their schools, rather than at local authority or central government level. These particular conditions shaped how the EEF was positioned, with a focus on equipping newly-empowered head teachers with the tools to make the most effective spending decisions for the benefit of the poorest pupils – a goal that, in the English system at least, could be most credibly made by an organisation at arm's length from government.

So although the EEF was set up with funding from England's Department for Education, it is deliberately constituted as an independent charity with a board of trustees appointed by its two founding partners – the Sutton Trust and Impetus-PEF, also two independent registered charities – and raises its own private income. The initial, expendable endowment of £125m is managed through a grant funding agreement with the Department for Education, but the whole sum was passed over to the EEF on inception in order to give the charity long term security and to enable it to raise additional funds (see below).

The charity has regular strategic and keep-in-touch meetings with the Department for Education, which also appoints a representative to sit on the EEF's grants committee (the subcommittee of the board which recommends programmes to test), but that representative does not have a casting vote. So, within the broad parameters set out by the EEF's initial grant agreement with government, the direction of the charity is determined by its trustees and its operational priorities by the executive team, led by Sir Kevan Collins.

The key benefits of independence

As our work has unfolded over the last five years, the benefits of the high level of independence the EEF enjoys have proved to be far reaching:

- **Objectivity** - The EEF process is guided by the evidence. While we are cognisant of the priorities of policymakers and practitioners (see below) we have no vested interest in a particular programme or approach. We stand by the results of our trials whether positive, negative or neutral -- and publish all results, even if those may challenge prevailing orthodoxies or policy positions.
- **Long term view** - We are free from the constraints of the political cycle which allows us to consider medium and long term impacts as well as immediate outcomes. We are conscious of the urgency of the attainment gap – and do all we can to produce clear evidence of what can make a difference as quickly as possible – but also recognise the need to monitor 'wash out' effects and to evaluate programmes that may take longer to reap results. The full impact of the intelligent use of evidence will be felt most as it becomes embedded in the culture of schools over years, not months.
- **Positioning in the sector** - The EEF believes that evidence empowers professionals to make better decisions which are appropriate to their context. Our independence underlines this supportive and constructive role to teachers - and deliberately separates us from the high-stakes accountability and regulatory frameworks of government. This sympathetic positioning has practical benefits: it helps recruitment to our trials and assists with the dissemination and mobilisation of our knowledge, as we are seen as a trusted brand, not an ideological vehicle.
- **Flexibility and efficiency** – The EEF's status as an independent charity means we can operate with low overheads (more than 90% of the endowment goes directly to running and evaluating programmes in schools). It also means we are agile and entrepreneurial in our decision making and can respond quickly to particular opportunities.
- **Leverage with funders** - The EEF has committed to generate an additional £42m over 15 years through fundraising. In the first five years we have managed to secure over £20m from corporate partners and trusts and foundations. Key reasons underlying this success are the credibility the above attributes give us with funding partners. We are perceived as independent, research-led, and nimble; we can leverage money from our endowment to match-fund philanthropic contributions, but we are not stymied by bureaucracy or seen as partisan. Many of our funders have a policy of not funding statutory organisations; the EEF is seen as undertaking important 'value added' work beyond business as usual.

The freedom to be responsive

This independence has not meant for us poor ties with policy-makers, or a lack of accountability to, or a distant relationship from, the teaching profession. In fact, we have found that it is *because of our independence* that we are able to remain relevant and responsive to a wide range of stakeholders, without becoming beholden to any particular constituency.

The majority of our work to date has been driven by schools' needs and informed by our close contact with the sector: through the 7,500 schools involved in our projects, our Research Schools Network, our Advisory Board and the considerable day-to-day engagement of EEF staff at profession-led conferences, seminars and workshops. Our recent focus on the most effective approaches to marking and classroom feedback is a good example of an area of work which emerged from the grass-roots. We have found the EEF has the freedom to meet teachers' demands for evidence across all areas of interest – including those which are beyond the current policy framework, or highly sensitive, and which a government-sponsored body might find it difficult to fund.

The EEF does, however, work closely with the Department for Education and other parts of government to provide evidence on proposed policies and to build the research in areas of importance to Ministers and those driving the national agenda. We have, for example, undertaken dedicated funding rounds in the areas of literacy at the primary/secondary transition and character skills in order to bring a more robust evidence base to issues of policy interest. In doing so, the cornerstones of the EEF approach – our freedom to determine the projects to fund, the importance of truly independent evaluation and of clear communication of the results – were non-negotiable. Far from being a compromise to our independence, such links to government are essential: even in a devolved education system such as we have in England, government priorities are directly or indirectly passed down the chain for schools to enact and it is a core part of our mission to equip teachers with the evidence to support effective decision-making in line with these priorities.

The endowment underpins our effectiveness and our approach

The endowment of the EEF, to be spent down over 15 years, has given us the financial security to focus solely on our primary task of using evidence as a lever to improve outcomes for young people. We have not had to bend our priorities to follow funding or devote significant effort to ensuring the organisation's own survival year-on-year.

This magnitude of funding allows us to take ownership of the evidence chain, from assimilating the current research, through commissioning trials to fill evidence gaps, to setting that evidence to work through dissemination and mobilisation activities to ensure it has real impact in schools. We find the benefits of independence mentioned above – and particularly the credibility and flexibility this give us - apply equally across all aspects of our work, whether that be the reach of our Teaching and Learning Toolkit into schools, or our ability to recruit local advocates to spread key lessons emerging from our trials. While partnership is integral to delivery, a coordinated approach also allows these elements to be

closely linked and, crucially, communicated to the teaching profession and other practitioners using a common framework and vocabulary.

Beyond the focus it gives us to pursue our objectives, our endowment has also proved a cost effective use of public funds¹. To date, investment of the initial capital has generated £33m of additional resources to be spent on funding projects, evaluations and dissemination activities. If this figure is combined with the fundraising, mentioned above, we have so far generated over £50m of additional income on top of our initial £125m endowment; and are on track to raise in excess of £75m over fifteen years.

A complementary approach across countries

Our partnership with Social Ventures Australia, and our emerging ties with not-for-profit organisations in Latin America, Europe and elsewhere, has highlighted the potential benefits of international collaboration on building evidence in education. These partnerships are part of a much wider effort to marshal the evidence in education in a coordinated way across the globe – the What Works Global Summit in London last month, attended by delegations from around the world and at which EEF provided the keynote address, highlighted the emerging consensus on this agenda which is stronger than ever before.

The crux of this consensus is not only a realisation of the power of evidence to improve pupil outcomes, but a recognition that a number of centres working internationally, under a common framework and to common evidence standards, is mutually beneficial and will have a far greater impact than one institution acting alone. Evidence generated in one nation is of value to schools in others and vice-versa; the key role of the national body is to translate this to their local context. Partnership could take a number of forms: simply using and contributing to the same evidence base; collaborating on trials across countries; or jointly working to develop teacher-facing guidance and resources.

The organisations that are at the leading edge of this work are closely tied to, but distinct from, governments: each enjoys a similar degree of freedom – to collaborate, to act objectively, and to take a medium to long term view of impact. An Australian entity which shared these features would make a significant contribution to the international effort and could, in turn, draw on the support of the global network to strengthen its own local objectives.

Data availability

A final point we think it would be useful to make in our response relates to the Commission's findings on the availability and quality of data in the Australian system. It is worth highlighting that the EEF would not be as effective and efficient as we are, nor would

¹ The National Audit Office concluded that: “The Department’s initial investment in the EEF was relatively large: £125 million. However, given the early stage of developing the evidence and the fact that the money is to be spent over 15 years, publicly funded research still constitutes only a small element of the overall Pupil Premium policy. The EEF grant equates to £8.3 million a year, less than 0.4% of the annual £2.5 billion Pupil Premium allocation to schools.”

we be able to track the longer term impact of our work as well, without the National Pupil Database (NPD), overseen by the English Department for Education. The NPD allocates each child in England with a unique pupil number; the database contains basic administrative information on, for instance, address and schools attended; attainment on national tests (at age 7, 11 and 16 and, potentially, 18); as well as information on key demographic characteristics (such as eligibility for free school meals, English as an additional language, ethnicity). This is a hugely rich resource for the EEF which is also being linked to other national data sets around university progression, employment outcomes and earnings.

The main benefits of the NPD for the EEF's agenda are worth bearing in mind as the Commission considers the context in which an Australian entity would be working:

- *Cost effective evaluations* – Wherever possible, the EEF's independent evaluation teams use national tests as our baseline and / or outcome measures in trials. This reduces testing costs (we don't have to pay for separate, bespoke tests as we make use of assessment that is happening in schools anyway) and data collection problems, such as attrition (the data can be directly accessed by evaluators through the NPD rather than collected individually from schools). Almost all EEF trials we now set up use NPD data at either baseline or assessment stage, meaning that our money can go further and our trials are more likely to reach the highest levels of robustness.
- *Data tracking* – All students in EEF trials can be matched to the NPD in the EEF's data archive. This allows us to a) track the longitudinal impact of all our projects to determine whether the immediate impact of a programme is sustained over time; and b) allows us to make comparisons between EEF programmes using a common data set.

Final thoughts

The EEF has learnt a great deal over our five year history and are constantly refining and reflecting on what we do, as well as learning from others. Any success we have enjoyed to date is undoubtedly underpinned by a number of factors, some of which are contextual and some which are simply good fortune. But the most important, in our view, are structural and deliberate and mutually reinforcing: our independent legal status and governance model; our relationships with government and the schools sector; our long term funding model; and our end to end approach to the evidence chain.

We believe these will be important factors in the Australian context too and are happy to share our experience and to explore any part of this response further with the Commission. The EEF has a self interest in this work – we see international partnerships increasingly central to delivering our UK mission. But it is also very much in our DNA to co-operate and to work with others to improve the outcomes of children and young people.