

**AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION  
NATIONAL EDUCATION EVIDENCE BASE – ISSUES PAPER, APRIL 2016**

**Terms of Reference**

*In undertaking this inquiry, the Commission has been asked to report on and make recommendations about:*

- *the kinds of data that are needed to support a comprehensive evidence base to monitor educational outcomes and to inform policy development and evaluation in early childhood and school education*
- *any additional kinds of data that could add value to the existing evidence base, such as data on non-cognitive skills of students and relevant information from outside the education sector*
- *barriers to sharing or accessing data, and how these can be overcome; such as privacy concerns and national and jurisdictional data governance structures and protocols*
- *the role of technology in supporting the scope, quality and timeliness of data collection and reporting*
- *the costs and benefits of options for improvements to the national education evidence base.*

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

The Issues Paper has a specific focus area on education and the value of education data in relation to a sound evidence base to inform policy and evaluation the areas of childhood and school education.

The role of SA NT DataLink is to facilitate access to data that can inform policy and evaluation in a wide range of areas and whilst it is not a 'specialist' in the education area, it does have significant experience in addressing questions in relation to data access and availability more generally that are relevant to this inquiry.

SA NT DataLink is continually expanding the types of data and the year ranges of the data. A description of the data currently available through SA NT DataLink is available from its [website](#). For example, it is expected to receive SA Health Mental Health, Drugs of Dependence and SA Ambulance data and is negotiating access to the SA Catholic Education data and higher education and TAFE sector data and Department of Planning Transport and Infrastructure's Motor Vehicle accident data.

SA NT DataLink is also preparing a submission to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into '*Data Availability and Use*' referred to in this Issues Paper and the Commissioners are asked to refer to that SA NT DataLink's response.

SA NT DataLink also provided a submission to the *Senate Select Committee on Health Inquiry into Health Policy, Administration and Expenditure 2015* and as part of this Inquiry was invited to respond to further questions on data and data access. In particular:

1. *The collection, linkage and access to health data, international policy developments, and challenges faced, and reform proposals that may improve overall health outcomes.*
2. *Improving access to and linkage between health data sets held by Commonwealth entities. This is framed in light of the increasing use of complex data collections in public policy development.*

A copy of the SA NT DataLink submission (no 181) is available

at: [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Submissions](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Health/Health/Submissions).

This Submission also addresses many of the questions relating to better data access and use raised in this Issues Paper.

SA NT DataLink also agrees with the arguments and conclusions in the Commission's previous publications concerning better use and availability of Government held data.

Given SA NT DataLink's role is much broader than the provision of education data, SA NT DataLink is providing summary responses to the Terms of Reference rather than address each of the questions in the Issues Paper. These are in all likelihood better addressed by those working directly in the education sector.

### **Data collections and purposes of education**

To a large extent, the data required is determined by the focus and framework for the issues that are to be addressed. That is, the strategic and operational educational policies and programs that are to be implemented or evaluated.

For example, depending on whether education is seen from a utilitarian principle, of training for employment and economic productivity, or more broadly for life skills and wellbeing at individual or societal levels, will determine the policy and funding imperatives and therefore the data required to inform these.

School education outcomes alone may be a performance measure or outputs for a system which are of value in evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching curriculum but education outcomes may also need to be related to the outcomes desired or expected at individual, community and societal levels, and the consideration of schools as one of the focal bodies contributing to the development of communities and social cohesion. To understand these, a much wider range of data is required.

There is significant research which indicates that higher educational outcomes can be related to better health and life skills. These in turn have bearing on the overall costs to governments. However, understanding the complexities of the pathways leading to the outcomes is necessary if more informed evidence-based policy is desired and if educational outcomes are seen as one part of wider policy objective. The types of data required will therefore also need to encompass a broader range of factors determining outcomes.



## Data collections

When considering the above, the kinds of data to more fully understand outcomes and pathways to the outcomes include:

- Preschool and school data
- Post-secondary
  - University
  - TAFE
  - Private providers
- Health data, including:
  - Perinatal
  - Child health
  - Mental health
  - Hospital and ED (public and private)
- Disability
- Spatial data
- Housing
- Immigration
- Economic/Centrelink
- Employment

Therefore access to and use of datasets such as those described above, and the technical ability to undertake high quality and complex analysis based on well-established data linkage methodologies, is required to enable the detailed analysis for more comprehensive understandings of the complexities and pathways that lead to educational and wider outcomes.

## Barriers/issues to access and providing data

Governments already have access to considerable education data and well informed research that can evaluate and inform policy. There is a legitimate question to be asked as to whether the best use of the data is being made for this purpose in relation to educational outcomes.

There are also a number of barriers or issues that need to be better addressed that can maximise efficient access to the data, particularly where there are cross jurisdictional matters. In summary, these are:

- Education is primarily a State/Territory responsibility but also Commonwealth (and privately) funded. These two Jurisdictional areas have differing priorities and accountabilities.
- Apart from the Commonwealth, there are differing priorities between State/Territory jurisdictions (driven by differing economic and political imperatives of the jurisdictions).
- Pricing (cost recovery for the provision of data) would be a vexing question since even within any one sector (e.g. Government) it would be difficult to determine a consistent pricing model. Pricing should not inhibit access to or use of data.

- Incentives between government and private school sectors to participate in more open data provision would vary.
- Data collection should not add to the burdens of schools and increasing red tape. Therefore the use of already collected administrative data is the most efficient outcome.
- Differences in the legal and policy governance and authorising environments between jurisdictions present particular challenges.

### **Governance and authorising environments**

Having consistent governance and authorising environments that effectively support the provision of information is vital to the efficient and timely use of the information.

While it would be ideal to create a nationally consistent approach in the provision of data, and its governance, Australia's federated model works against this. However, in the education sector, the national reporting requirements and the consistent set of record identifiers are already established making linkage and longer term analysis across jurisdictions more feasible than, for example, in the health sector.

However, across jurisdictions and organisations, there may be legal and cultural parameters which often mitigate against an efficient cooperative system to facilitate the effective use of the data for government and research purposes. Addressing these would require at least a high level heads of agreements approach, particularly where there is no existing overarching regulatory governance framework supporting this.

Even within jurisdictions, there may be legislative, organisational cultural and resource barriers that restrict the ability, willingness and capacity share data between agencies much less identifying information that can enable the linking of data (within a privacy protecting framework) across these agencies. The use of data linkage can support a much more complete evaluation of the effectiveness (including cost effectiveness) of government policies and interventions.

Any model for better data availability and use must be considered in the context of the various jurisdictional legal arrangements, agreements, policies and practices. Legislation can mandate and support the provision and protection of data to provide public confidence in its secure management and most likely require COAG agreement to a mandated uniform approach or common Agreement.

Apart from the acceptance of data sharing, there are major practical and resource issues relating to the consistency, usability and provision of data that are difficult to address where agencies are increasingly focussing on their core business as the implications of the ongoing reduction of resource capacity and capability take hold. Any agreement at government levels should also have the potential to make resources available to achieve the objectives.

There should be clarity and agreement by key stakeholders, and especially consumers, as to the policy objectives, the parameters for data provision and use and the mechanisms to achieve these to ensure public confidence as part of underpinning any proposals to address the key data sharing issues.

Since a very significant sector in education are non-government educational bodies, it is essential that this sector is supportive of its data provision and use and that they are willing to participate in the regulatory and governance authorising environments.

### **Security and privacy protection**

Ensuring the security of information and the provision of information in ways that protect the privacy of individuals is fundamental to the operation of SA NT DataLink and to creating and maintaining the confidence of consumers.

From SA NT DataLink's experience, there are well established technical security measures and protocols to manage risks to privacy, as well as principles such as the 'separation principle' that are fundamental to the operation of SA NT DataLink and based on national and international best practice in privacy protection.

However, for the private sector there may be commercial/competitive barriers, depending on the data that is being sought, especially for publication that need to be addressed so that they can be confident that the data they provide and later made available is consistent with their interests.

### **Community/school responses**

It is SA NT DataLink's experience that there is generally a positive community response to the use of privacy protected personal information for the betterment of services and outcomes. This has been mostly communicated in the use of health information.

However positive community responses and interest in relation to provision and use of data are, they would reasonably be expected to differ if their personal information was being used particularly for commercial interests without their consent.

Within this context, addressing expectations and concerns of consumers is paramount if there is to be a general acceptance of making personal data available without strong provisions for privacy protection. Providing assurance and mechanisms that maintain the security of information and protect individual privacy are critical and as part of this, having transparent mechanisms and processes to address a breakdown in privacy is essential.

It is reasonable to anticipate that community responses would be largely governed by the information that is made publicly available and school responses governed by how the data was used and made public (for example, the current 'My School' site). The linking of data to performance outcomes and public comparisons that are not sensitive to the 'nature' of the school population does court controversy. However given the potential to link a wide range of data and undertake much more nuanced analysis there is the potential for more positive outcomes if the educational responses are used to understand and support the schools/educational bodies and their communities.

### **Summary comments**

Despite challenges, there are considerable benefits in having cost effective and efficient access to a standardised education evidence base with consistent data standards and quality across all

jurisdictions, particularly if the purpose is solely focussed on school based outcomes. To a significant extent, this has been achieved through the national reporting requirements. However, the key benefit is as a basis for understanding the jurisdictional and regional variations in outcomes. This will be limited if the data cannot be readily linked to other relevant databases. The issue then becomes a more general one of data access and availability.