

3 October 2016

Commissioner Jonathan Coppel
Productivity Commission
530 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

Dear Commissioner,

The Mitchell Institute welcomes the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on the Education Evidence Base and congratulates the Commission on its work. Strengthening the education evidence base has the potential to transform outcomes for young Australians.

We especially welcome the recommendation that education research in Australia be guided by a coherent strategic plan, with an independent body to oversee commissioning, quality and dissemination.

A dedicated national body will help address a significant gap in policy and practice relevant evidence. It is also consistent with our initial submission to the inquiry.

However, we note that between the Issues Paper and Draft Report, the Commission's focus has moved from strengthening the quality and accessibility of administrative and research data – and on the importance of driving the data linkage agenda – to a focus on commissioning more research and better utilising experimental methodologies in Australia.

Commissioning more and higher quality research is important and necessary, but is not sufficient.

Australia needs to establish a data and information infrastructure to enable ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the experience of students and impact of education initiative and systems.

We need to make a broad range of data available to early child education and care (ECEC) centres, schools, the agencies that help support student and family wellbeing, and families and communities more broadly to:

- understand the experience of young people in their centres, schools and communities,
- help target their efforts to improve outcomes, and
- continually monitor and refine the impact of these efforts.

Research studies enable point-in-time measurement of effective practice, and should guide decisions on where to prioritise investment and identify where practice can be improved to deliver better outcomes.

But one-off studies are not sufficient to ensure scale up of improved practice, for ongoing fidelity monitoring and for impact measurement at scale.

Accordingly, we also need a data improvement and access strategy and an organisation with responsibility for:

- supporting improvements in the quality and consistency of administrative data,
- driving the data linkage agenda, and
- making core data items available and accessible systematically and at local, regional, state and territory and national levels (in the way that Australian Early Development Census [AEDC] data is, for example).



There are a number of elements of the Draft Report that we strongly support, and several recommendations that we believe could go further, outlined in Attachment A. We have also provided comments on several of the Commission's Information Requests.

We would be happy to discuss our response with the Commission as it prepares its final report.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sara Glover
Director, Mitchell Institute

Attachment A: Comments on recommendations and key points

Draft Recommendations 7.2 and 8.1

The Draft Report highlights the importance of collaborative policy leadership and setting research priorities for education. Clear, agreed educational goals for Australia with bipartisan, cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral support would be of significant benefit to policy and practice in Australia, and would help ensure the investment in education research supported enhanced decision-making.

The proposal to establish a national coordinating body with responsibility for implementing a strategic research strategy and commissioning relevant and high-quality research is a key priority for strengthening the education evidence base.

As noted, an explicit commitment to making research and data available to the community is also important. We need a national data improvement and access strategy and an organisation with responsibility for driving this agenda, including through:

- A responsibility for translating existing data and research findings into policy and practice relevant information;
- Making research data available for secondary data analysis (as recommended in the Draft Report); and
- Capacity to support the development of higher quality and more consistent administrative data, especially in the ECEC sector, and to maximise the utility of existing data collections.

The recommendations around making data more accessible to researchers are also welcome, especially removing restrictions on use of de-identified data, systematically obtaining consent for using data for research at the point of collection (Draft Recommendation 5.1), establishing exemptions for public interest education research and harmonising privacy legislation (Draft Recommendations 5.2-5.5), and establishing a register of metadata (Draft Recommendation 7.1).

The Mitchell Institute notes, however, that it is not only researchers who seek or benefit from access to existing data. ECEC centres, schools, community sector organisations, peak bodies, policy advocates and others are also stakeholders in education data, but generally have few resources and limited capacity to access data relevant to their needs. For example, a primary school that wanted access to linked perinatal, AEDC and NAPLAN data – to better understand their cohort of children and to track the impact they were having on their student’s success in high school – would be unlikely to have the resources to commission a research project, and should not have to.

There are some core elements of existing administrative and survey data that should be systematically made available to enable better local decision-making, to track impact on an ongoing basis, and foster more robust policy conversations.

Draft Recommendation 3.1

Stronger recommendations are needed to drive improvements in the quality and consistency of existing education data. It is certainly appropriate to consider ensuring that data is fit for purpose and quality improvements are feasible. However, an effective system should generate the kinds of data needed to monitor its impact, and the impact of policy decisions, as part of its essential infrastructure. It should systematically generate data that informs policy questions now and into the future. Effective use of administrative data is considerably more cost effective in the long term than one-off research studies.

In ECEC in particular, there is a pressing need to generate more consistent administrative data. Currently, the sector operates under multiple data collection regimes, with inconsistent requirements and a lack of granular data.

Although progress has been made to improve the National Collection, there is much more work to be done. The absence of high quality, consistent, granular ECEC data poses significant challenges for guiding appropriate policy decisions.

Draft Recommendation 3.2

The establishment of new birth cohort studies, with new cohorts to be recruited on an ongoing basis, can generate high quality and in-depth data on critical issues related to policy and practice. Adding new cohorts on a regular basis will enable long-term tracking of social trends and the impact of policy changes in a way that is not currently possible. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) and Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) have been hugely significant data collections that have provided critical information for policy-makers and researchers.

It is critical that high quality data on the children's experiences of early education and care be a core part of these studies, especially the use of internationally recognised and comparable measures of quality of ECEC settings.

Draft Recommendation 4.1

The recommendation to reduce the cost and compliance burden of respondents is appropriate, but we are cautious about the recommendation to privilege sampling over census collection methods. Decisions about methodology should be driven by the objectives of the data collection rather than an a priori privileging of one method over another. There are instances – such as the AEDC – where the data could not be replaced by a sample without losing the underlying purpose and utility of the data. The AEDC provides small-area data and unparalleled coverage of disadvantaged cohorts, neither of which would be achieved through sampling methodologies.

Better use of high quality and consistent administrative data – and embedding the collection of this data into ordinary processes, generally already happening, in universal services – creates longitudinal census data at much lower cost. This data creates a backbone of information, and samples can be used to derive more in-depth information or to better understand specific cohorts.

Acknowledgement of non-cognitive capabilities and wellbeing

Mitchell Institute also welcomes the Draft Report's acknowledgement of the importance of considering non-cognitive capabilities and wellbeing, and the work we are undertaking with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

However, Australia would benefit significantly from a nationally consistent approach to measuring wellbeing, for example, through a tool like the Middle Years Development Index to complement the Australian Early Years Census. This is an appropriate area for the Commission to make recommendations about.

Connections to tertiary education data and workforce participation data

Mitchell Institute acknowledges that tertiary education (higher education and vocational education and training) data was not in scope for this inquiry. However, understanding young people's pathways and transitions into tertiary education and the workforce are central to understanding the effectiveness of our education system. Connecting the early childhood and school education base with outcomes around tertiary participation and workforce impacts should be a priority for the education evidence base.

Comments on 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

As Mitchell Institute noted in its submission to the Issues Paper, strengthening the Australian evidence base about the practice and impact of ECEC is critical.

The AEDC is an enormously important data source. Its introduction in 2009 transformed our understanding of the nature and distribution of developmental vulnerability among Australian children. AEDC data has contributed significantly to a range of policy decisions, and has proven to be an important catalyst for local cross-sectoral collaboration and the implementation of prevention-focused strategies to prevent vulnerability.

It derives its power both from being a census – and therefore providing very local-level data – and by how accessible its data is to ECEC centres, schools and communities.

It is a necessary but not sufficient source of information on the impact of early childhood policy and practice.

As noted in our submission to the Issues Paper and in our *Quality Early Education for All* report, the critical issues for early education policy are the links between dosage (number of hours), duration (number of years), quality and outcomes. With a more robust understanding of children's patterns of attendance and exposure to high quality early education, we will be better placed to make appropriate investments in early childhood.

The Draft Report recognises that it is important not just to understand 'what works', but to understand 'what works, for whom, in what circumstances'. Given we know that there is significant regional variation in attendance rates and patterns (and levels of quality), and need to measure the impact of dose, duration, quality and outcomes as these change over time, the answer here is not a one-off research study but an information infrastructure that enables ongoing monitoring of practice and impact. This depends on high quality and consistent administrative data. Linking that administrative data to AEDC data would be valuable, but the AEDC on its own is not sufficient.

In addition, the average age of children during the AEDC collection is 5 years, 7 months. When we know how important the first 5 years of children's life are to their long-term outcomes, this is too late to be the first robust check-point for children's learning, health and wellbeing.

The value of the AEDC would be maximised through sustained and systematic linkage with other early childhood data, including ECEC access, and with a range of later data collections.

Information Request 4.1: The Commission seeks further information on a unique student identifier

The Mitchell Institute identified the difficulty of tracking students throughout their educational journeys – from early education through to post-tertiary transitions – as one of the most significant challenges in the education evidence base.

This limitation makes it difficult to track the impact of policy changes in early childhood throughout the lifecourse (even though international research shows that is long-term outcomes that drives the strong return on investment from early years investment). It inhibits our understanding of the factors that drive early disengagement from school, and prevents evidence-informed preventive interventions. It makes monitoring of policy and systems design differences challenging.

One of the challenges of maintaining jurisdictional-specific systems is that jurisdictions interface with national systems – in ECEC and tertiary education – and it is through this connection to other systems that a unique student identifier is especially beneficial. There would be significantly less benefit to a unique identifier that did not carry across early childhood, schooling and tertiary systems.