



Good Shepherd

Australia New Zealand

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Jonathan Coppel and Julie Abramson
Commissioners - Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base
Productivity Commission
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Dear Commissioners,

Submission - Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Good Shepherd) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base.

Good Shepherd has a long history of working with and for young people at risk of disengagement from education, including through our registered and accredited independent school, The Waranara Centre, which provides a safe and supportive learning environment for students to achieve high school qualifications and to work towards other vocational goals. We support students through a 'wrap around' model of care that enables the barriers to learning such as poor mental health, family violence and substance abuse to be addressed through a range of services.

Our education programs are complemented by research and policy analysis in this area which has focussed on equitable school funding, keeping public schools affordable for disadvantaged families, educational inclusion, empowerment approaches to encouraging parental engagement in education, and including girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths pathways.

Moreover, Good Shepherd has been developing and trialling systematic and comprehensive service participant outcomes measurement and evaluation approaches in order to:

- better understand the
- impacts of our work;
- promote accountability to service participants, funders, the sector and wider community;
- adapt our services according to evidence; and
- use practice evidence to inform our policy and research agenda.

This submission has been developed drawing on this extensive practice, policy and research experience in supporting education pathways for marginalised people and responds to the Inquiry's Draft Report (September 2016), referred to in this submission as the 'Draft Report'.

This submission is structured as follows:

Part 1 relates to point 2 of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, offering suggestions for additional information that could be considered and how it might add value to the existing evidence base.

Part 2 responds to point 4 of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, exploring factors that inhibit access to, and consistency of, education-relevant data to support analysis and evidence-based policy development.

Within each part of the submission, we make recommendations with respect to the Productivity Commission's final report on the National Education Evidence Base.

Part 1: Additional information that could be considered and how it might add value to the existing evidence base

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians clearly articulates the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society¹. The Melbourne Declaration identifies that improving educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are two significant advances that need to be made to the Australian education system. While little progress has been made since this declaration was made in 2008, data and evidence are powerful tools that can be used to better understand, respond to and progress educational equity.

The *National Education Evidence Base - Productivity Commission Inquiry Draft Report* (Draft Report) identifies three evidence gaps requiring attention: the benefits of early childhood education and care in Australia; the value schools add to students' learning, considering students' backgrounds and prior levels of achievement; and policies and practices that work best to improve outcomes, which our organisation welcomes. Good Shepherd believes there are three further key gaps requiring systematic, nationally consistent approaches to data collection in order to improve policy and practice responses that are aligned with the national goal of schooling that promotes equity and excellence. These are: **student equity, student engagement, and 'broadening' outcomes.**

1.1 Student Equity

The Draft Report (p.7) highlights that differences in academic achievement can be attributed, in large part, to teachers and that directing attention to higher quality teaching can have large positive effects on outcomes. Further, the Draft Report (p.13) acknowledges that 'external influences', such as gender, health and culture of learning in the home shape outcomes for students and our organisation supports these observations. However, Good Shepherd believes the report's overriding emphasis on teaching does not adequately reflect the strong correlation between student dis/advantage and educational outcomes. As evidenced by a range of data and analyses², **socio-economic circumstances are key determinants of educational success.** Our own research and policy work³ highlights **poverty as the single biggest contributor to educational disadvantage.** As such, we would welcome further emphasis in the Draft Report on these determinants and their impact on educational outcomes, as well as the ways data can be used to help identify and address equity issues and ensure accountability to students, parents and communities.

Recommendation 1.1:

Regarding *Draft Finding 3.1* (P. 24): Include that data and evidence should be used to track students' progress according to equity indicators and that education equity progress reports should be made publically available (for example by tabling reports in parliament annually), as a tool to promote equitable schooling.

¹ Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (2008) *Melbourne Declaration On Educational Goals For Young Australians*

² Including: Goss, P. and Sonneman, J. (2016) *Widening Gaps: What NAPLAN Results Tell Us about Student Progress*, Grattan Institute; OECD (2012), *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, OECD; Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Buckley, S. (2015) *PISA 2012: How Australia measures up*, ACER.

³ These include *I Just Want to Go to School* (2012), *Standpoint* (2010) and the *Low Income Awareness Checklist for Schools* (2004)

1.2 Student Engagement

Arguably, one of the consequences of a limited focus on social determinants of education is that young people exit the school system without completing Year 12 or taking up an alternative pathway. Leaving school early is believed to begin with a process of disengagement⁴ and there are approximately 300,000⁵ young Australians disengaged (or at risk of disengaging) from education in any given year. The consequences of early school leaving include⁶:

- Social exclusion;
- Long-term welfare dependence;
- Reduced life satisfaction;
- Poor mental health;
- Increased vulnerability to involvement in criminal activities.

Despite these significant, negative consequences, there is a distinct lack of data on the scale and scope of educational disengagement and interventions that are effective in promoting engagement. Data are needed to accurately evidence how many young people disengage and reasons for disengagement; actual pathways of young people who leave school early; and effective interventions to re-engage or find appropriate alternative pathways. Additionally, our research indicates that the ‘middle years’ (from ages 8 - 12) are a critical time where disengagement with school begins, yet there are policy and funding gaps to adequately support this age group.

Recommendation 1.2:

Regarding *Draft Finding 3.1 (P. 24)*: Include that there is a gap of national, coordinated, consistent data and evidence on young people, including those in the ‘middle years’ who are at risk of disengaging from the education system and those who leave school early.

1.3 ‘Broadening’ the types of outcomes assessed

The prominence of “a broad range of [student] outcomes” in the Draft Report (p. 55) is welcome. We understand from our own research and evaluation⁷ that for young people, especially those who experience mental health challenges, **wellbeing predicates academic achievement** and as such the assertion that specific measures of social and emotional health and wellbeing are incorporated into the evidence base is significant.

As an agency committed to addressing structures and systems that hinder the safety and resilience of women and girls, Good Shepherd believes the establishment of a National Education Evidence Base presents an opportunity for collection, analysis and reporting of student outcomes related to **citizenship, social cohesion, human rights and gender equality**. These outcome domains have critical linkages to the *National Action Plan to Reduce Violence against Women*, because schools are a key setting in contributing to the socialisation and cognitive and emotional

⁴ Robinson, E. and Meredith, V. (2013) ‘Family Factors in Early School Leaving’ *CFCA Paper no 16*, Australian Institute for Family Studies

⁵ Based on PISA result that on average, over 20% of Australian 15 year old students reported feeling that they did not belong, or were not happy or were not satisfied at school and ABS figures on school participation: Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Education and Training: Primary and Secondary Education’, *Year Book Australia 2012*

⁶ Robinson, E. and Meredith, V. (2013) ‘Family Factors in Early School Leaving’ *CFCA Paper no 16*, Australian Institute for Family Studies

⁷ Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (2016) *Distance Travelled: an Evaluation of The Waranara Centre* [forthcoming]

development of children and young people⁸. As such an outcomes framework to measure changes in attitudes related to human rights and gender equality should be developed.

Recommendation 1.3:

Regarding *Draft Finding 3.1* (P. 24): Include that an outcomes framework should be developed to measure and report progress towards citizenship, social cohesion, human rights and gender equality in a nationally consistent fashion.

Part 2: Factors that inhibit access to and consistency of education relevant data to support analysis and evidence-based policy development.

The Draft Report highlights the importance of data and research quality in building an education evidence base (p.69). Good Shepherd supports the emphasis on quality information to apply to policy and service development, however notes the complexity of both measuring multifaceted aspects of student progress and in defining ‘quality’ evidence and research.

2.1 Complexity of measuring student outcomes

The Draft Report notes (p.14) that point-in-time measures such as the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores do not provide a full picture of the impact schools have on student learning, and we fully support this.

Good Shepherd’s evaluation practice reveals that for young people, especially those who are marginalised, **progress to achieving positive learning outcomes is often incremental and non-linear**. In measuring outcomes of young people with “multiple and complex difficulties... what may appear to be very small changes can, for some, still be highly significant”⁹. For example, an individual attendance rate that increases by a small percentage may be significant for the individual student. In addition, achievement of desirable outcomes is often dependent on a range of factors that intersect with the education service provided because young people on the margins of education often experience multiple, complex challenges that affect their attendance and learning, such as mental health challenges and family conflict. Therefore, a focus on intermediate outcomes and progress relative to baseline rather than ‘absolutes’ (such as overall average attendance rates) is likely to promote accuracy of data.

Recommendation 2.1:

Regarding *Draft Recommendation 3.3* (P.25): Include that efforts to measure non-cognitive and cognitive outcomes should consider methodologies that enable incremental and non-linear progress to be captured.

2.2 Nuanced understandings of ‘high quality’ evidence

While the Draft Report advocates for an investment in high-quality education research, Good Shepherd is concerned about the emphasis in the report on “randomised controlled trials, to build the Australian evidence base on what works best to improve education outcomes,” (p.168) and that this methodology has been identified in the Draft Report as the “gold standard” (p.70) for testing causal relationships between interventions and outcomes.

⁸ Our Watch, Vic Health, ANROWS (2015) *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, p.39

⁹ Planigale, M. (2010) *Literature Review: Measurement of Client Outcomes in Homelessness Services*, HomeGround Services, P. 34

The interpretation of high-quality research should be broadened to reflect the ample evidence that a range of research methodologies is considered robust and that methodologies should be selected according to the contexts and purposes of particular studies. **The use of Randomised Control Trials (RCT) in particular for social interventions is highly contested ethically and practically.** In terms of the appropriateness of this methodology, UNICEF has deemed it should only be considered suitable¹⁰ when:

- the population sample is large
- the intended impacts of the program or policy can be readily agreed and measured (such as in the case of specific medical interventions);
- the RCT is planned before an intervention begins.

Recommendation 2.2:

Regarding *Draft Recommendation 7.2* (related to proposed activities 2 and 3) (P.27): Include that a research framework should be developed that has a nuanced, well informed understanding of ‘high quality’ education research and that methodologies are selected in accordance with the contexts and purposes of each individual research study.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit our evidence and analysis on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

Dimity Fifer

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

GOOD SHEPHERD AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND

¹⁰ White, H., Sabarwal S. & T. de Hoop, (2014). *Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 7*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence, p.2