

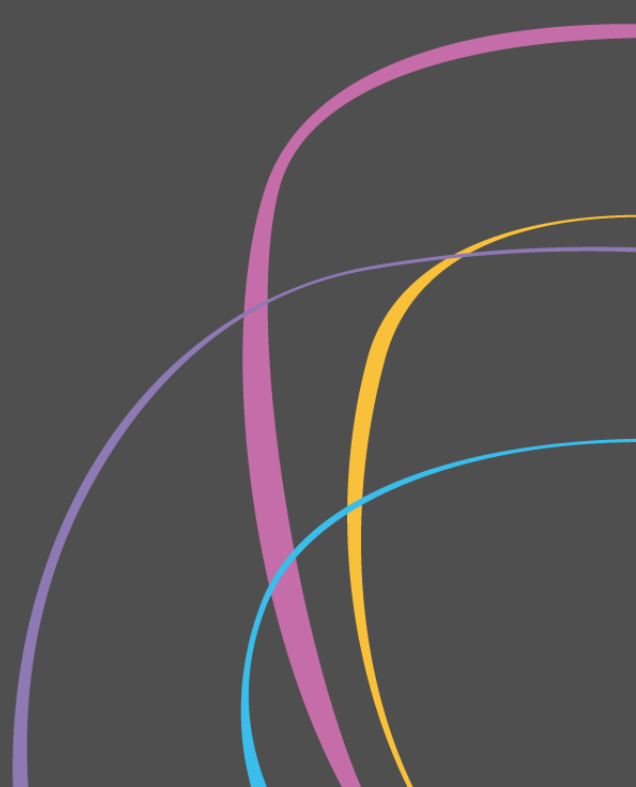
Goodstart Early Learning

Response to Productivity Commission's Draft Report on National Education Evidence Base Inquiry

October 2016

**goodstart
early
learning**

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1. Introduction

As Australia's largest not-for-profit provider of early childhood education and care (ECEC), Goodstart Early Learning is committed to ensuring all children have the learning development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

Goodstart welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Draft Report and emphasises the importance of including ECEC in a national evidence data base, noting that this builds on our previous submission.

Significant evidence demonstrates that investment in quality early learning yields multiple generational benefits for not only the child and their immediate family but the wider community¹. Participation in quality early learning sets children up for a successful transition to school and also serves to identify learning and behaviour issues before they become entrenched and require more intensive interventions.

Goodstart is committed to ensuring children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. Developing a strong Australian evidence base will assist in ensuring investment is directed at those policies and practices which are proven to achieve our desired goals and support children to successfully transition to school.

Goodstart supports the draft findings that existing data should be collected and used more effectively. Significant various sets of data exist in relation to children, their families and their participation in early learning programs. This includes information about the investment made by all levels of government and families. Greater linkage of these data would provide rich insights into which programs and practices best support children's development and wellbeing and importantly how to ensure vulnerable children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds get the support they need so that they are not behind their peers when starting school.

Therefore, it is important that a new dataset be established which captures the learning and educational experiences of children *before* they reach school. Goodstart supports further consideration of a unique child or student identifier as a means to develop a robust dataset regarding the learning and educational experiences of our children so as to inform policy and practice enables them to realise their full potential.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Commission in developing a national education evidence base to ensure Australia has a world-class education system which recognises that the most powerful learning occurs before school and therefore includes early childhood education and care experiences.

¹ Labour and Population Research Brief - Proven Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions, RAND Organisation, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/2005/RAND_RB9145.pdf

2. Key comments

Early childhood education data set

Goodstart strongly supports the establishment of a data set that captures children's preschool education and links this to school data and then tertiary and higher education data. This could be achieved through the linking of existing and refined data sets or the creation of a unique student identifier which is used for all children enrolled in an ECEC program.

Linking existing data sets

A range of valuable data sets currently exist which would provide valuable information about vulnerable children and how early childhood education programs could be structured to maximise protective factors. Linking family payments information, immunisation status of children, child care payments, regulatory information and AEDC data would provide a rich evidence base to inform future investment and policies and practice.

Unique student identifier

Goodstart supports in principle the creation of a unique student identifier which tracks a student's education journey from early learning through primary, middle and secondary school. Ideally, this identifier would also track education through the tertiary, vocational education and higher education sectors.

New LSAC cohort

Given current participants of the *Growing up in Australia* longitudinal study are in their early and late teen years, it is timely to establish new cohorts to add to this evidence base. This would provide rich information about contemporary early childhood and the protective and risk factors which support a lifelong learning.

AEDC

Goodstart strongly supports the continued funding and sharing of information obtained through the Australian Early Development Census. Australia is a world-leader in this respect as it is the only country to gather this information across all jurisdictions in a consistent manner. The AEDC provides valuable information about children's vulnerability and development against key domains, informing policy and practice.

Future governance arrangements

Goodstart supports in-principle the recommendation for an institution to be responsible and accountable for the implementation and functions as agreed in a national education research strategy, provided the costs of the institution do not outweigh the benefit of the research being undertaken.

3. Comments on Draft Findings and Recommendations

DRAFT FINDING 1.1

Notwithstanding substantial increases in expenditure on education over the past decade, national and international assessments of student achievement in Australia show little improvement and in some areas standards have dropped.

With the introduction of the National Quality Framework in 2009 and National Partnership Agreements designed to support children's participation in quality early childhood education and care, the increase in investment in early years has yielded significant improvements and can be evidenced through NAPLAN results in some jurisdictions². This only serves to underscore the importance of the early years in any national education evidence base and how the benefits flow through to the schooling, tertiary and higher education sectors as well as the broader community.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 2.1

In supporting the further development of a national education evidence base, governments should be guided by the following principles.

The national education evidence base should:

- meet the varied needs of decision makers at all levels of the education system
- provide high-quality data and evidence to inform decisions
- drive improved student achievement through four interconnected processes — monitoring of performance, evaluation of what works best, dissemination of evidence and application of that evidence by educators and policy makers
- generate benefits in excess of the costs incurred in collecting and processing data and in creating, sharing and using evidence.

Goodstart supports Draft Recommendation 2.1 noting that for the benefits to exceed the costs incurred in collecting and processing data, it is vital that data sets are linked. The value of a national education evidence base will only be fully realised when available data is joined up to provide a more holistic picture of a child's early learning and education experiences prior to school.

The monitoring of the effectiveness of policy and programs is vital to inform investment decisions. Furthermore, the translation and dissemination of such evidence is crucial in ensuring that governments, education institutions, program providers and families invest wisely to maximise successful educational outcomes for children and students.

² ABS 4261.3 – Educational outcomes, experimental estimate, Queensland 2011.

In 2015, amongst children aged 0-5 years, 42.9 per cent attended an Australian Government approved child care benefit approved service³, demonstrating the significant importance of including ECEC sector in a national education evidence base. Goodstart provides early childhood education and care to 69, 600 children across our 645 services. In addition, Goodstart employs over 900 qualified early childhood teachers and provides approved preschool programs throughout its network of services⁴.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 3.1

In assessing whether to improve the quality of existing education data, governments should examine whether:

- there is a need to improve the quality of the data so it is fit for purpose
- data quality improvements are feasible given the context of data collection
- other options are available
- the benefits of improving data quality exceed the costs.

The ECEC sector is rich with information about what works best for different children and families in various circumstances. This information is not collected at a national or systemic level, relying on informal networks, and occasional publication of predominantly qualitative research. Capturing fit for purpose data to support service planning, practice improvement and optimal child outcomes is essential.

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.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides a useful snapshot of a teacher's perception of a child's development at a point in time. It is a very useful tool but does not provide a robust evidence base to monitor how Australia is progressing against its early learning objectives.

The benefit of the AEDC is that it is a national collection which has been collected on three occasions (2009, 2012 and 2015). However it does not provide information on the quality or type of educational experience a child may have in the first five years of their life. Children can experience multiple formal learning experiences and waiting until the child is at school before there is a measure of the effectiveness of those different experiences and how they are contributing to the achievement of national policy objectives is too late.

³ Report on Government Services 2015, Chapter 3, Volume B, p. 3.25.

⁴ Goodstart Early Learning Annual Report 2016, p. 6, 15.

Linking up existing available data sets would be a valuable first step in providing this information. In the longer term, a new early childhood education data set could provide improved evidence to inform policy and practice. Furthermore, this information would complement the AEDC findings in providing a more holistic understanding of the child's education experiences.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 3.2

The Australian Government should request and sufficiently fund the agencies that conduct the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children to establish new cohorts of children at regular intervals.

Goodstart strongly supports new cohorts of children to be part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous children (LSIC). We know that children in vulnerable circumstances are the least likely to attend early education and many experience difficulty in commencing school⁵. Findings from new cohort studies would provide contemporary evidence about the experiences of children and how to best target services to ensure they are being delivered to those who need them most.

DRAFT FINDING 3.1

Ongoing initiatives should help to fill many of the identified data gaps.

- The Australian Government's proposal for a national Year 1 assessment should help to better assess performance of early school skills and to identify students who need early intervention.
- Work by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and relevant research institutes should help to improve methods and metrics for measuring non-cognitive outcomes.
- The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability should help to improve the monitoring of outcomes of students with disability.
- The development of a national minimum teacher dataset by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership should help to support workforce planning and assessment of initial teacher education.

Assessing performance in Year 1 is too late to best address social, emotional and educational difficulties⁶. Children experiencing learning and developmental difficulties are often identified before commencing school. This information is usually known at service and funding levels, presenting as a useful data source with which to inform targeted interventions and service provision. Evidence demonstrates that the earlier these challenges can be addressed the greater chance the child will go on to a successful transition at school and lifelong learning and realise their potential.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 4.1

Agencies responsible for collecting education data should review and adjust their procedures to reduce the administration costs and the compliance burden on respondents, including by:

⁵ Rosier K and McDonald M, *Promoting positive education and care transitions for children*, Australian institute of Family Studies, November 2011, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/promoting-positive-education-and-care-transitions-children>.

⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *The efficacy of early childhood interventions*, Research report No. 14, March 2006 <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/efficacy-early-childhood-interventions/executive-summary>

- to the greatest extent possible, collecting sample, rather than census data
- removing duplication in data collection and processing
- avoiding frequent changes to reporting requirements, but when changes are necessary, allowing sufficient time for respondents to comply with the new requirements.

Goodstart participates in a range of data collection exercises in regards to the ECEC sector⁷. While each provides valuable information for the specific purpose it is collected, it would be beneficial to reconsider the design and frequency of some of these collections in order to maximise efficiencies and provide timely and robust evidence to inform policy and practice. Improved data sharing across jurisdictions, at a unit record level would greatly assist in minimising the burden associated with participating in these important collections.

Goodstart supports both sample and census data collections as each offer merit depending on the objective(s) of the collection.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 5.1

Agencies responsible for education data collections should amend their processes for collecting personal information from parents/guardians to incorporate formal consent and notification procedures regarding the use and disclosure of personal information at the initial point of collection.

Goodstart supports the recommendation that instruments collecting educational data should include informed consent and that they should be provided on an opt-out basis, similar to the operation of section 95 guidelines in health research. This would provide researchers, policy makers and service providers to gain a more holistic understanding of the various impacts and circumstances which impact on a person's education journey. Often current practice and caution over privacy concerns, despite the de-identified nature of many data sets, hinder effective use of existing data collections. A standardised consent process to use and disclose personal information at the initial point of collection is also likely to minimise the regulatory burden associated with capturing and handling data as there would be a consistent process across educational institutions.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 5.4

The Australian, state and territory governments should pursue legislative consistency in education and related Acts regulating the use and disclosure of education information, and amend legislation so that it is aligned with the intent of general privacy laws.

⁷ National Early Childhood Education and Care Census, National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection and some jurisdictional specific collections such as Queensland's Early Childhood Education and Care Services Census.

Goodstart supports this recommendation as it would provide a consistent legislative approach to the collection and disclosure of education data which would greatly assist in being able to interrogate data to inform effective policy and practice.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 5.5

The Australian, state and territory governments should introduce policy guidelines which place the onus on data custodians to share data unless a privacy (or other) exception can be justified.

A number of de-identified data sets currently exist and could be linked to better inform the design and delivery of services. For example, linking datasets on family tax benefits, parenting payments, child care subsidies and ECEC census information would provide a rich source of information to identify which families access and benefit from early education and where additional supports may be required to ensure that vulnerable and disadvantaged children are not left behind their peers when starting school.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 7.2

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.

Goodstart supports the development of national research priorities and capabilities and importantly, the translation and dissemination of this evidence. This will provide policy makers, researchers and service providers with clear guidance on action to support improved early childhood education and school outcomes.

Goodstart is committed to identifying contemporary practice and policies which work best to improve educational outcomes for children and promote their successful transition to school. All communities are different and whilst international evidence provides a useful starting point to inform practice, an Australian evidence base which provides robust contemporary data would greatly assist in ensuring programs are designed to maximise their effectiveness and ensure those children who have the most to gain from participating in early learning are supported to do so.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION 8.1

The Australian, state and territory governments should task the COAG Education Council to provide explicit policy direction through a new Education Agreement, which would build on prior agreements and define the:

- objectives

- nature of the research to be undertaken in the bottom-up evaluation of what works
- evidentiary standards or frameworks to be applied, including assessment of cost effectiveness
- requirement for translation of evidence into guidelines accessible by schools, early childhood education and care services and teachers.

They should also request the Education Council to:

- assign an institution to be responsible and accountable for implementation of the functions set out above and in Draft Recommendation 7.2
- specify the assigned institution's governance arrangements, functions and operations including a responsibility for promoting a culture of using the evidence base by policy makers and educators.

Goodstart supports strong governance and clear research objectives in relation to a national education evidence base. However the cost of any institution needs to be outweighed by the benefit of the research and evidence it harnesses. In addition, contributing to a bottom-up approach to research should not impose additional costs on organisations seeking to deliver education services to children and students.

Goodstart supports the translation and dissemination of contemporary and robust research to inform policy and practice.

4. Closing comments

Early education experiences significantly shape and influence a child's transition to school and their aptitude for lifelong learning. Goodstart commends the Productivity Commission in examining the issues around a national education evidence base and strongly supports the inclusion of early education as part of this work.

Behind Goodstart

Goodstart was created by a partnership of organisations who saw the potential of early learning to transform Australia. They wanted to address one of the key sources of many future problems—poor early childhood experiences.

It made perfect sense for these groups to pool their energy and invest in early learning to fix the root cause of so many social problems.

benevolent
SOCIETY

Formed in 1813, The Benevolent Society is Australia's first charity. It is a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation that helps people, families and communities achieve positive change through support and education.

SVA
social ventures australia

Social Ventures Australia is a non-profit organisation established to improve the lives of people in need. It focuses on keys to overcoming disadvantage including great education, sustainable jobs, stable housing and appropriate health, disability and community services.



**Brotherhood
of St. Laurence**
Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood is a not-for-profit organisation that works to alleviate and prevent poverty through research, services and advocacy. It is a non-government, community-based organisation that supports people experiencing disadvantage at all stages of life, to build a better future for themselves and their families.

**MISSION
AUSTRALIA**

Mission Australia is a non-denominational Christian community service organisation that aims to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities across Australia. It works to help people secure jobs, receive an education, find housing and develop important life skills.

Goodstart would like to acknowledge the funding and support provided by:

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New South Wales Government
Northern Territory Government
Queensland Government
South Australia Government
Tasmania Government
Victoria Government
Western Australia Government

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