



everyone's family

National Education Evidence Base

Submission on the Productivity Commission's Draft Report

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Anne Hampshire
Head of Research and Advocacy
Level 9, 117 Clarence St
GPO BOX 10500
Sydney NSW 2001

Ph: 02 9085 7249
Email: Anne.Hampshire@thesmithfamily.com.au

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on the National Education Evidence Base. It supports the development of principles to underpin efforts in this area, and while endorsing those articulated on page 5 of the draft report, we would prioritise that the national evidence base should:

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.

In line with the above objective, we support a range of comments made in the draft report including efforts to:

- enhance data linkage while respecting privacy legislation
- harmonise privacy provisions across jurisdictions
- achieve more consistency in how data elements are defined (for example disability) across and within jurisdictions
- incorporate formal consent processes as close as is feasible to the point of enrolment
- implement a system of mutual recognition of approval decisions by data custodians and ethics committees.

The Smith Family strongly supports the Productivity Commission's emphasis on evidence needing to influence and guide policy and practice – this goes to the heart of the purpose of data collection – and would argue that considerably greater efforts are required to ensure that this occurs. The discipline of implementation science – which has been more widely applied in some other areas – has much to offer education.

We would also argue that the principle of 'sharing data' should go well beyond governments, to include a wide range of organisations and individuals including, but not limited to research, education, non-government and philanthropy. A number of these organisations are interested in important *long-term* educational policy issues that for a range of reasons governments may not be in a position to prioritise.

Framework

While understanding the thinking behind Figure 4 (page 7) and the roles of various parts of the 'system' in regards to the education evidence base, the language ('top down and bottom-up') coupled with the current visual does not reflect the integrated and complementary data and information infrastructure that The Smith Family believes is required to drive improved student achievement. The Commission may want consider how better to describe and visualise this.

Scope of educational data

While noting the focus of the draft report on 'school' and early childhood education and care programs, The Smith Family would highlight that there are a broader range of education-related programs which are currently being implemented across Australia by a range of organisations, including non-government. Many of these programs are aiming to achieve outcomes which are in line with those which Commonwealth and State/Territory jurisdictions have identified as important. These include school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in employment and further study. Some of these programs seek to influence critical non-school factors (for eg parental engagement in children's learning) which have been shown to be important in educational achievement. While occurring on a much smaller scale than the school system, the capacity for these programs to contribute to the evidence base and help drive improvements in educational outcomes should not be underestimated.

By way of example, as identified in our initial submission to the Commission, The Smith Family has developed a large longitudinal data set of disadvantaged children and young people. We are using it to track and improve the educational outcomes of young people on our programs and through analysis, research and evaluation, contributing to building the body of knowledge regarding 'what works, for whom and under what circumstances'. As such, The Smith Family would suggest that some recognition be made in the Commission's final report of the potential contribution of efforts occurring outside of government that can contribute to building a national evidence base.

Fit for purpose methodologies

The Smith Family is cognisant of the costs of data collection and in particular of censuses. While agreeing that surveys have a role to play in building a national evidence base, which methodology/ies will be most appropriate should be informed by the objective or purpose of the data collection. Of particular importance in the Australian context is building up a nuanced understanding of 'what works **and for whom**', given that at the aggregate level Australia's educational outcomes can appear satisfactory, while 'hiding' the poorer performance of particular groups of young people.

More vulnerable students – such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds – tend to be under-represented in surveys, so an over-reliance on this method of data collection could have a range of negative consequences. This includes limiting the capacity to assess the impact of educational policies and initiatives, as well as tracking the educational progress being made by individual students or groups of students, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, what is likely to be seen as increasingly important, is understanding the *combination* of factors which influence achievement. For example, the impact of gender *and* Indigeneity, or disability, Year level *and* parental employment, on educational outcomes. The capacity to explore the multiple factors which impact on educational outcomes is likely to be reduced through an over-reliance on surveys.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has been a particularly valuable source of data, given its extensive coverage – both geographically and for different groups of children – the quality of the data collected across a range of domains, and the acceptance it has gained across a broad range of stakeholders. The AEDC has allowed

national attention to be focused on the extent to which Australian children (by community and by some demographic characteristics) are 'ready for school' across a range of domains, as well as identifying how this has changed over time. It has also been effectively used to drive local collaborative, cross-organisational efforts focused on improving a range of children's outcomes. While there may well be opportunities for enhancing the value and usefulness of the AEDC, The Smith Family believes it has already highlighted the value of a census approach in some areas.

While noting above the potential costs of data collection for evaluation purposes, The Smith Family would argue that these costs are generally a small percentage of overall program expenditure. This expenditure is essential in order to ensure an assessment can be made of the impact of particular initiatives.

Unique student identifier

Research by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) has highlighted the high level of mobility of students in NSW government schools and the detrimental impact of mobility on student attainment, progress and school completion. This research showed that (conservatively) around one in 20 students are highly mobile and disadvantaged groups are more likely than their peers to be mobile. While the data is only for one Australian state and does not take into account moves between government and non-government schools or interstate, it emphasises that mobility is an "additional indicator of educational disadvantage".¹ This research provides part of the rationale for the importance of a unique (or universal) student identifier.

The Smith Family sees a unique student identifier as one of the foundations for efforts aimed at improving the national education evidence base, and in turn, the educational outcomes of young Australians, particularly those groups who are currently not performing as well as their peers. It would for example provide longitudinal data on which to track student progress and understand the impact of policy initiatives, as well as reduce the current reliance on measures such as 'Apparent' retention.

At a school level, a unique identifier could also contribute to improving the transitions of students who are mobile, providing school staff with valuable information to enhance their ability to support such transitions.

The value of a unique identifier would unquestionably be enhanced if it applied across early childhood, schooling and tertiary systems. This would allow more comprehensive assessments of policy initiatives to be made and contribute to better understanding of 'what works, for whom and under what circumstances'. How such an identifier could be used to enhance understanding of young people's pathways and transitions post-school, both into further education and employment is also worth considering. This is particularly important given that in 2015 close to 12% of young Australians aged 15 to 29 years (or 580,000) were not in employment, education or training (NEET), with potentially significant negative impacts on them and Australia over the short and longer-term.² More effective use of data across childhood, through school and into young adulthood, could

¹ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (March 2016) *Does changing school matter?* Learning Curve Issue 13

² OECD (2016) *Investing in youth Australia*.

make an important contribution to policy development aimed at reducing the number of young Australians classified as NEET.

Non-cognitive skills

Australia has a well-established system for collecting student data on students' reading, writing, and numeracy skills across their school life. This is complemented by participation in international data collection such as through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Programme in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS). Understanding how Australian students – at individual, cohort and aggregate levels – are tracking in these core skills is a key component of building a national evidence base.

Increasingly however, research is highlighting the importance of non-cognitive skills in predicting educational success and later-life outcomes. The OECD has noted for example, that non-cognitive skills predict later-life outcomes, with the same or greater strength, as measures of cognitive skills.³ Further, when developed in combination, skills such as self-efficacy, motivation, goal setting, progress monitoring and problem solving, appear to influence improvements in academic learning and success in children and young people.⁴

While noting that there are initiatives underway to increase the collection of data related to non-cognitive skills, The Smith Family would note that these are currently nowhere near as advanced as the collection of data on skills such as reading and numeracy. Given the importance of non-cognitive skills to educational outcomes we would see the development and implementation of effective ways of measuring and capturing growth in these areas as a priority.

Balancing usefulness and cost

The Smith Family appreciates the merits of the new initiatives proposed in the draft report. We particularly reinforce the need for cooperative policy leadership and the development of national research priorities, as part of efforts aimed at building the national evidence base. We support the articulation of this within national Education Agreements.

A number of the report's recommendations could be achieved with relatively modest expenditure given that they are seeking for example, greater consistency across jurisdictions. Ensuring that there is a quality data infrastructure able to systematically generate information to inform key policy and practice questions is critical. Consistent and high quality administrative data should be an important part of such an infrastructure. Such data is usually longitudinal and so could potentially be used to greater effect than it is currently. Recent developments by the Department of Social Services under its Investment Approach provide a useful example of how administrative data can be used.

³ OECD (2014) 'Fostering and measuring skills: Improving cognitive and non-cognitive skills to promote lifetime success'. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 110.

⁴ Gutman L & Schoon I (2013) *The impact of non-cognitive skills on outcomes for young people*.

We also note that some of the proposed initiatives, particularly in combination, for example, regular new cohorts for the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) and the *Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (LSIC) and a potential new 'research institute' would be costly. Given the under-utilisation of these and similar existing data sources, the potential for better use of high quality and consistent administrative data, and the constrained budgets of all jurisdictions, ensuring the best use of available resources is critical.

Longitudinal studies such as LSAC, LSIC and the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth* (LSAY) provide unique insights, particularly when they are able to link with other data sources. Their longitudinal nature allows them to explore relationships between various items such as school attendance and school completion, or participation in early learning and care services and later achievement. They can also potentially be used to explore the impact of universal policies, both on all young people and on particular groups of young people.

While acknowledging the unquestionable benefits of such studies, we are mindful of the cost of adding new cohorts, the significant opportunities which exist to further mine the data already collected from the existing cohorts and the existence of other longitudinal data sets (for example The Smith Family's) which could be further exploited, in order to contribute to the national evidence base. Decisions around the addition of new cohorts should take into account the opportunities identified above.

The draft report's proposal of a new 'institution' could also potentially require significant resources so carefully thinking through its key functions and the additional value it would add to what already exists is critical.

The Smith Family has noted in policy submissions over a number of years, including our initial submission to this Inquiry, that:

"There is currently no systemic way in Australia for sharing evaluation and research efforts in education. Other areas of public policy have developed Clearinghouses for sharing knowledge and good practice in 'what works' and ideally what 'doesn't work'. Other areas have also developed formal processes for accrediting evidence based programs (see for example the Commonwealth's *Communities for Children* program). Yet these approaches are absent nationally in education, despite important contributions from organisations such as the NSW's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). The lack of a national clearinghouse results in significant inefficiencies and a reduced likelihood of effective and scalable initiatives being developed and implemented across Australia. The end result is not only wasted resources but even more critically the failure to implement effective initiatives that positively impact on young people's educational outcomes."

We would therefore particularly welcome efforts aimed at enhancing the sharing and broad dissemination of research and evaluation efforts in education. Ensuring that such dissemination is timely, targeted and occurs in formats appropriate for a diversity of users, is particularly important. This clearly includes ensuring that teaching staff, principals, policy makers and non-government organisations are supported to access and utilise

research and evaluation findings. We would again note the good work being undertaken by CESE in this regard, through for example, their *Learning Curve* publications (see <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/publications/learning-curve>). Further information on the range of other functions undertaken by CESE is available at <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/>

In addition to CESE, there are also obviously a range of other organisations, such as the Australian Council for Educational Research and ACARA, who are undertaking educational research and evaluation. Any 'new' institution must ensure it builds on and does not duplicate existing efforts. Disseminating and supporting stakeholders to *use* and *respond* to high quality evidence, both from a policy and practice perspective, should be a key function, with translation efforts being particularly important.

While there is a clear need for collaborative national leadership in the research and evaluation undertaken in this area, the value of extensively commissioning 'new' research is less clear to The Smith Family, given the potential costs and the extent to which there is untapped value that can be gained from existing data, research and evaluation efforts. Priority should be given to first leveraging existing data, research and evaluation efforts before pursuing commissioning new research.

Conclusion

The Smith Family would strongly urge that efforts aimed at enhancing Australia's national evidence base and strengthening the infrastructure needed to support this, focus on generating nuanced understandings of ***what works, for whom and in what circumstances***. Given that there are a range of factors that appear to significantly impact on the educational outcomes of young Australians, for example, location, family background and Indigeneity, strengthening the national evidence basis must involve going well beyond aggregate data. It must seek to understand the particular circumstances which contribute to educational success for different groups of students. This is complex and painstaking work – young people are highly diverse, live in a wide variety of circumstances and are involved in education over many years. There is no one 'silver bullet' for ensuring long-term educational success. However the personal and national stakes of educational failure are enormous and demand that Australia does significantly better in building a national evidence base that contributes to improving the educational outcomes of all young Australians, particularly those young people who are currently not realising their education potential.