



Early Childhood Australia

A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

Inquiry into the Education Evidence Base – response to draft report

Productivity Commission

Early Childhood Australia

About us:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the national peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood sector. ECA advocates for quality in education and care as well as social justice and equity for children from birth to eight years. We have a federated structure with branches in each state and territory. In 2013, ECA celebrated 75 years of continuous service to the Australian community.

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ECA welcomes the Productivity Commission's draft report on the education evidence base. Our organisation is committed to a strong evidence base at all stages of education, which will underpin education policy that builds Australia's future prosperity.

We support the need for a national evidence base, not just a data repository, to allow both monitoring of performance, and evaluation of effectiveness. We agree that there needs to be inter-governmental agreement on "developing a high quality and relevant Australian education evidence base" and one institution should be made responsible for "the implementation of the evaluative research framework, which is accountable to, and funded by, all governments". ECA reiterates the importance of high quality administrative data to understanding education outcomes and program impacts, particularly across stages in education, and across sub-populations. This remains a need we hope that the Commission, and governments, will address. This should include either a unique identifier or other systems that achieve the objective of ensuring linkage of student data across stages in education.

Responses to the Commission's draft report observations and draft recommendations

Draft Recommendation 2.1

ECA agrees that a national education evidence base should meet the varied needs of decision makers at all levels of the education system and provide high quality data and evidence to inform decisions.

Those decision-makers include the operators of early learning services, educators, administrators, and families, so it is important to build data systems that are open and accessible to all.

Currently there is systemic under-investment in the evidence and research base. Given the massive public and private investment in education, and the known current challenges with assessing outcomes over the lifecourse, we believe it is clear that the benefits of strengthening administrative data systems and research will outweigh the costs.

Draft Recommendation 3.1

ECA understands the issues the Commission is identifying in its recommendation; however we ask the Commission to reframe its recommendation, so that it better reflects the weight of evidence, and the consensus of people working with data in education. We do not believe any credible case has been made to the Commission to suggest that existing system data does not need improvement, or that it is currently fit for purpose, particularly in terms of assessing outcomes across components of the education system, between jurisdictions, and at the community level.

In this regard, ECA is concerned that our own submission to the Commission's inquiry may have been misunderstood. In its draft report, the Commission quoted our submission in the context of considering costs and benefits of developing nationally consistent data on early learning outcomes, saying:



Early Childhood Australia (sub. 71, p. 8) expressed similar views and suggested that existing data on early childhood outcomes might be sufficient:

Children's development is not linear and so it can be difficult to measure and use data on how children are developing during this period, as children may develop differently. The AEDC, as well as later data such as NAPLAN, already reflect on what has occurred during the first five years, and may be used to research early childhood education effectiveness.

A key sentence in our submission was the one that immediately followed those quoted:

However, in order to do this, there needs to be an effective administrative data set which spans the first five years.

Thus, while we agree that measuring development within the early learning period can be difficult, we do not support a position that says existing data is sufficient. Rather, we only indicated that we did not take a view on whether a completely new data collection before the AEDC was needed. There is definitely a need for higher quality data in the area. ECA supports strengthening the capacity of the AEDC to inform progress against early learning objectives.

ECA requests that recommendation 3.1 be revised to state:

In improving the quality of existing education data, governments should:

- **examine how to improve the quality of the data so it is fit for purpose**
- **ensure data quality improvements take account of the context of data collection; and**
- **prioritise those improvements to data quality that deliver the greatest benefits compared to costs.**

ECA supports draft recommendations 3.2 and 3.3.

Draft Recommendation 4.1

It is important that agencies responsible for collecting education data periodically review and adjust their procedures to reduce administration costs and the compliance burden on respondents. This can be achieved, as the Commission recommends, by removing duplication in data collection and processing; and by avoiding frequent changes to reporting requirements, and, when changes are necessary, allowing sufficient time for respondents to comply with the new requirements.

ECA does not believe that the Commission has been presented with evidence to show that sample data will achieve what is needed in some cases.

ECA requests that the Commission change its recommendation around methodologies, so that the language focusses on adopting appropriate methods, rather than privileging one method over another.

The early learning sector for example finds the AEDC to be vital in local area planning and analysis, and for understanding service needs of small groups in ways that a survey would fail



to support. ECA recognises, however, that if Australia had stronger and more comprehensive administrative data, which was more effectively managed and made more widely available, then the need for stand-alone analyses – whether survey or census – might be diminished. The key to this however is strengthening the quality, consistency, and linkages, of administrative data.

Draft Recommendations 5.2 To 5.5

ECA is pleased to see recommendations supporting the proposal, made in our initial submissions, for legislative change that would enable greater data sharing/linkage and access for approved organisations and for an approved purpose. However, “public interest research” should not mean only research in an academic sense, but include analysis for example by service providers or sectors who want to understand the populations they serve, and improve their performance. We support a process of scrutiny and approval of such use.

ECA requests that the text supporting recommendations 5.2 and 5.3 be revised to make clear that public interest research includes appropriate access and analysis by stakeholders, subject to scrutiny and approval.

Draft Recommendation 7.1

ECA is pleased to see the recommendations in chapter 7, reflecting the position we argued in our first submission, on data governance and the importance of national data and research strategies.

Other recommendations

The Commission’s draft report includes in its key points that governments should:

assign an institution to be responsible for the implementation of the evaluative research framework, which is accountable to, and funded by, all governments

specify the assigned institution’s governance arrangements, functions and operations.(p. 2)

ECA requests that these key points should be reflected in the text of recommendations.

We note that the draft report indicates that “improved workforce data are necessary to support workforce planning and assessment of the impacts of initial teacher education on classroom readiness and student outcomes”. The Commission has previously identified issues in this area, in its report on the schools workforce. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is working on the development of a national minimum teacher dataset. The Commission in its draft findings notes that this “should help to support workforce planning and assessment of initial teacher education”. This dataset, if agreed and implemented, has the potential not to cover the ECEC workforce.

ECA requests that the Commission translate its finding into a recommendation that the dataset proposed by AITSL be implemented, and that it be extended to cover all education.

Until and unless that dataset is implemented, we ask the Commission to recommend the strengthening of the National Early Years Workforce Development Census.