

SUBMISSION TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION: Interim Report Number 5 of the "5-year Productivity Inquiry: From learning to growth

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Interim Report.

I have responded the interim report, "The Review of the National School Reform Agreement". Much of what was written in that report are relevant to this interim report also. However, there are, naturally, issues relevant to the whole education system itself, or more properly that part concerning the school education sector. As I have said elsewhere, there are a great many other aspects and influences on education outcomes besides schools. Those influences have a profound influence on the success of the school sector including its productivity. That is briefly recognised in Section 2.4 and Figure 2.2 of this report.

In my previous submission I have pointed out severe deficiencies in the present policies concerning learning in schools. I will repeat some of the comments in my previous submission where they are relevant.

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The following important comments are mentioned the Foreword to this report.

- 1, A quality education benefits both individuals and society
- 2, The demand for formal qualifications is rising
- 3, The nature of the skills demanded by the Australian economy are shifting

The foreword observes, "Australia's current education outcomes are relatively good overall. But recent trends point to some cause for concern." That is not the impression one would gain from public commentary though that is qualified later! One would think from most of the commentary about school education in Australia that performance was poor. Any successes there have been are obscured by identification of problems, mainly declines in the level of achievement as indicated by the metrics used, notably those from the 3-year PISA surveys. That results from the other notable international survey, TIMSS don't show decline. Unfortunately most of the public commentary focuses on the rank achieved by Australian students. That is simplistic and ignores the statistical basis of the figures in the PISA reports and other OECD reports based on PISA data.

It is further noted in this report that, "The employment rates for both university and VET graduates have decreased over the past decade, and employer satisfaction with the quality of VET graduates has fallen." It is very important to understand what the nature of assessment is that leads to employers' views, other than hearsay. If outcomes are relatively good and employers consider otherwise then there must be a disjunction between the dimensions of the student education and the requirements of employers. It is tempting to make assertions about the latter.

There are particular problems in some areas of recruitment, notably as to employment of women at senior levels and employment of older people. Is there evidence as to the expectation by employers of the need for further training of young people, or even older people, upon their joining the firm? Has their investment in training and development decreased or increased in recent years, perhaps as part of a drive for efficiency, emphasised by the present general attitudes as they relate efficiency to effectiveness, or even the conflation of the two?

Of course, it is entirely reasonable, and indeed essential, that generational progress be made in both higher average learning outcomes and skill levels.

I note that the Foreword then draws a comparison with the health sector where "The culture of using and disseminating evidence in education — through rigorous trials and broad take up of evidence-based approaches — is not well developed compared, say, to the health sector, where scientific advances have cured diseases and increased life expectancy."

That comparison is highly problematic. First, the health gains have been a gradual accumulation of solutions to a large number of specific individual issues, such as the role of vectors in eliminating certain specific transmittable diseases, secondly the development of specific drugs to address specific transmittable and non-transmittable diseases.

The pharmaceutical industry cannot be held out as hugely successful, most notably recently, on respect of pain relief through the overuse of addictive drugs, the marketing of which has been managed by the industry itself!

If the approaches mentioned were to be applied to school education, not only would trials be required involving the administration of certain strategies of instruction to some students and other strategies to others, or perhaps no strategies at all, as a control group.

The comparison could only be made by completely ignoring the huge volume of scholarly research all over the world in the education fields addressing every aspect of education from early childhood development through the role of parenting to methods of teaching and assessment, the contribution of principal leadership and on and so on. The comment is entirely unhelpful. There are many examples.

Parenting has a huge influence on later educational achievement. There is substantial research in the field. Are we to imagine that certain approaches would be promoted, on the basis of evidence?

In teaching language, certain views are advocated in certain quarters about the teaching of language, whole of language or phonetics, or some other approach. In many cases the evidence for each may be problematic but the proponents may not be prepared to look across the entire field of language learning.

In history there is substantial research but that is hardly applied as the argument comes down to content and cultural and similar issues, not pedagogy. In Australia there is substantial interest by younger people and awareness of the many problematic periods, especially those affecting First Nations people. The debate about constitutional change and the enacting of the "Voice to Parliament" suggests that in some quarters there is a very concerning lack of awareness of Australian history including recent history, as well as the import of various United Nations conventions such as that on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

And last, mathematics. There is very good evidence as to what approaches produce superior results. It is largely ignored: it requires additional resources and as well there is argument about content as opposed to pedagogy. Teaching mathematics should lead to an appreciation of what it is about and how much it

contributes to the world around us, rather than simply the instrumental outcome that it would equip students to deal accurately with the financial transactions in shopping.

Learning, like parenting is not like woodwork or physics, the same inputs produce different results. But there are general guidelines and lessons on what is effective and what isn't. By and large, in Australia, they aren't followed.

As in my other submission I have made the point that too many people not sufficiently aware and respectful of the available research who nevertheless have considerable influence. Some of those people have been used in reviews by past governments; some of them were not even qualified in any branch of the education field.

As the Report says, education is vital for productivity. However, the principal benefit is to the social gains, individually and for the community. And the eventual contribution of education is to the individual and through that to the the community generally. Through that people are able to contribute to society. However, thst is influenced by a large number of other conditions, in the workplace especially by the conditions such as the relationships between people at all levels of the organization, the remuneration and security of employment, the opportunity for learning and for advancement, the procedures governing judgement of performance and promotion.

Those comments are absolutely apposite in situations in sectors such as aged care, such as hospitals, such as service industries in financial and related sectors. Think the customer experiences of dealing with banks and the behaviour of many companies in the financial sector. How often are the contributions of employees stymied by outdated attitudes and procedures set by managers who don't have the requisite skill level, skills and knowledge which of course are gained after leaving the formal education system.

The fact is that it isn't only skill levels that have underpinned recent productivity though, considering some of the workplace conditions which are the subject of numerous reports, one could be forgiven for concluding that productivity gains have been achieved despite the contribution of management and policy requirements.

Two points should be never lost sight of. First some eighty percent of productivity gains are due to the contribution of employees. Second, some eighty or more percent of the financial gains are to capital, shareholders and executives and not to the employees. That wages have flatlined for many years whilst the remuneration of executives and shareholders have increased to levels previously unheard of is absolutely disgraceful and severely damaging to society. Inequality costs!

In other words, it would be reasonable to expect that those not engaged in management ore investment would be not very prepared to be involved in discussions about ways to increase their productivity until the disparities and inequities re addressed.

Creativity and innovation are principal contributors to ongoing productivity and prosperity, as mentioned in the report. Both require a preparedness to take risks and a capacity to cope with ambiguity and well as the capacity to look to the

long-term. The assertion by Nobel prizewinner Milton Friedman that the principal role of executives of a firm is to increase shareholder value has led to a focus on short-term gains as well as practices damaging to the economy and levels of service.

Other Nobel prizewinners have asserted that resource allocation and pricing should be left to the market, rather than government and that has removed human judgement in many situations where it is vital and allowed monopolies and reduction of competition where it would be important. The notion that the private sector is inherently more efficient than the public sector and that therefore government should be involved in regulation as little as possible has led to practices which in the end require correction by government, often after costly inquiries or, before financial collapses damaging to individuals and the economy.

A consideration of what skills are needed for the future is absolutely vital! It has not been done, resulting in huge shortages of people in large numbers of sectors. Those shortages are not all due to the Covid pandemic but to refusal by governments to be involved in and, or support "manpower" planning. Supposedly the market was supposed to deal with the issue. Considering the areas of specialization of university graduates one would have to severely question that. Of course there has been an increase and will continue to be high demand in jobs calling for non-routine cognitive abilities. And there are instances of entry to university courses being controlled by the elite of certain professions.

The Report progresses to performance of the education sector. Many of my comments in the response to the National School Reform Agreement apply and I repeat them below.

Many of the economic issues and commentary of the digital economy and its intersection with the education sector are beyond my competence to make any comment.

It must be continually kept in mind that learning is a social process and critically involves interaction between "expert" and "novice". Some of the assertions about home schooling and remote schooling using the latest advances in digital technology such as conferencing does not recognise that. The recommendations on attention to individual students in the second Gonski report acknowledges that.

I do have a couple of other comments. As to universities there can be little doubt that the intervention of government has mostly been detrimental. The assertion by Minister Dawkins that universities are businesses and should be run like a business was nonsensical and have been damaging. What behaviours of businesses might actually improve university performance are entirely unclear. What has happened is an increase in "administrative" staff including in operational and marketing areas and increasing separation of senior university administrators from academic staff.

The insistence that clear criteria be developed for judging excellence in research has absorbed a lot of time for absolutely no gain in inquiries. There are indeed lessons from leading research centres as to what processes and arrangements lead to superior research outcomes. Similarly, intervention in courses offered intended to privilege those that produce job-ready graduates is based on ignorance and is entirely unproductive. The report deals appropriately with a

number of relevant issues. It must surely be astonishing that governments who consider the market the most effective way to allocate resources and determine price should at the same time intervene in decisions affecting directions of teaching and research.

There certainly is a need for greater attention to university teaching. But if the rewards in terms of employment, promotion and access to research grants privilege conduct of research, then involvement of academic staff in teaching will reduce, as indeed has happened. Tutorials are now largely taught by graduate students, very often employed on a temporary or sessional basis. It is important to understand what students consider the most important outcomes from their attendance at universities.

The funding of universities, considering the enormous contribution that universities make to the store of knowledge and the fact that many eventual outcomes result from initial investigations in seemingly unrelated areas, demands that governments stay away from intervention in determination of who gets grants, especially where recommendations for award have been made by grant fund advisory bodies. Ministers are simply not competent to make such judgements. Is exploration of whether Pied Butcher Birds make music really certainly not going to produce useful knowledge? How would one know?

The importance of the contribution also demands that the destructive reduction in overall funding of universities be reversed. It is action that has also invaded non university research bodies such as CSIRO which just the other day cancelled an important monitoring project because it wasn't bringing in money. Such outcomes are absolutely disgraceful and indicative of more than ignorance.

In respect of the VET sector it is important to recall another government intervention which led to negative outcomes. The entry of private providers was close to a disaster. Basing policies on the notion that competition and choice govern outcomes in education is nonsense.

(The privileging of private schools has produced no superior outcome except in a few cases and has led to inequities greater than in almost any other OECD country as consistently reported by PISA and related OECD reports.)

Last, in respect of universities, the increased reliance on funds earned from fee-paying students from outside Australia has contributed nothing to Australia outside of saving the government money. Even the US, with its often mentioned distaste for the views of experts and academics, continues to provide substantial sums for research, at levels not heard of in Australia, something that leads to emigration of promising Australian scientists.

Education policy deals only with schools though the influences on learning achievement by school students are many and complex. In respect of some of them, unless they are addressed improvement of student learning at school will be more costly and significantly less effective than it should be.

Before passing to the commentary submitted to the other report I want to emphasise the extremely important section in the report on making the best use of school staff. Figure 2.2 is extraordinarily important and to a large extent, exploration of it is key to understanding the achievement of schools. The point is that a large number of factors influence eventual achievement in learning by

students at school. And in developing school education policies they simply are not addressed.

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The following is from my previous submission, as mentioned.

Much of the influence on learning achievement in schools is outside the school as noted in figure 2.2, as I have said. If government wants to achieve gains, these factors absolutely must be addressed intelligently. The knowledge and understanding of every one of the influences is substantial.

The assertion is often made that not enough is known about what contributes most significantly to learning. The literature from research on education is vast, of high quality and international. The findings have been applied in some countries but unfortunately not to the required extent in Australia. The assertion is wrong and utterly unhelpful. Schools are organisations: we know a great deal about what makes them successful, and the lessons can be applied to schools. But it is not the lessons of corporatisation and market economics, increasingly criticised by leading economists worldwide! I won't address the assertion in the subsequent report by the Commission that compared with research in the health field, knowledge in the education field lacks rigour. This is both wrong in general and misunderstands the nature of the problems being addressed. Teaching and learning aren't woodwork or physics: the same inputs don't always achieve the same results because people vary considerably for a whole host of reasons!

The critical influences are

- 1, early childhood influenced by the SES background of the family and the mother's education level.
- 2, the nature of the parenting and the extent to which a variety of activities are provided to expand the child's learning opportunities
- 3, the availability of early childhood education and care centres, especially in the case of less advantaged families and the financial cost to the family of access and other conditions for subsidy where they apply
- 4, the SES profile of the school enrolment, which in part is influenced by the funding levels which is a factor in parent choice.
- 5, the influence of peers and involvement in school activities including such things as music and out of school activities, both cultural and sporting.
- 6, the influence on learning by the administration of summative standardised tests such as NAPLAN

I want to make some general comments on schools and teaching and learning.

Response to issues of learning achievement and the alleged declining achievement, outside of funding, are the training and skill of teachers and the composition of the curriculum.

#### *The curriculum*

The curriculum is not the most important element of the learning environment. The most important goal is the encouragement of an attitude towards learning which will guide the student's later life. It is quite possible that any curriculum would achieve that. As Professor John Hattie and others have pointed out, the greatest impact on student achievement is what the child brings from home and

the next most important is the skill of the teacher, which most certainly doesn't just mean content knowledge.

Of course it is necessary that certain fundamental abilities and essential knowledge are acquired by every student. But there is evidence that creativity, typical of young children, declines in later years. The fact that students are more likely to follow the methods they are taught than those they discover for themselves is relevant. Traditionally a lot of emphasis was placed on the correct way to do things and the correct result. Where the student has a substantial involvement in discovering "truths" for themselves leads to much greater learning outcomes. That is why out-of-school activities and subjects such as those in the arts fields are so effective.

But when the argument about the history curriculum for instance involves assertions that the history of Australia from 1788 to 1945 should take precedence over a wider consideration including relations between Europeans and First Nations people and the history of later migration and the impact on the natural environment, the argument becomes merely a distraction.

#### *The impact of parents and politicians*

Parents, because they have all been to school believe they know what makes an effective school. They don't. Not in detail anyway. The performance of members of any organisation is affected by the extent to which the environment is an inclusive one, where each person's contribution is acknowledged and respected, even if it is disagreed with, and where they believe they have a reasonable degree of control over their contribution. Integrity and fairness are essential.

Compare this with the situation in schools: there is a very low level of trust in teachers by parents who are prepared even to interfere in basic decisions and, to an extent in response to that, politicians also continually tell teachers what they should be doing. One recent minister asserted teachers in public schools weren't in simple terms, up to the job compared with those in independent schools. Which is nonsense! They also often say there is no clear evidence as to what makes for effective teaching. And mandatory reporting is required against standards which they have had no part in forming. After all that what do we expect of teacher performance and student achievement?

It has to be admitted that various Ministers at various times demonstrate a lack of understanding of the issues they are commenting on in respect of various curriculum subjects. Genuine consultation with experts in the various fields and acceptance of diversity, where that is productive, would be more appropriate. Otherwise, education becomes propaganda.

#### *Standardised testing*

The application of standardised testing, formative in that it takes place long after the lessons, the content of which is being tested, has been delivered. Formative assessment, which involves frequent testing shortly after lessons, would be effective and was recommended by the second Gonski Report. Of course that would require that teachers be trusted and additional resources be allocated.

In any event the detailed statistics, in PISA reports for instance, are clearly not understood by many lay commentators including journalists and the "solutions" introduced by politicians do not address what the PISA, or TIMSS, data show. The incorporation of the NAPLAN results into MySchool, superficially admirable in

giving choice, won't really contribute because understanding the data requires a level of statistical knowledge which many parents lack. People are nervous about math and indeed many do not understand the basics required. Is choice being exercised on the basis of student achievement or is it most heavily influenced by the opinions of friends and neighbours and the parents' cultural and religious beliefs?

And the PISA data are unreliable anyway because many students don't really try, partly because they cannot see the relevance to them. Further, submitting to the tests involves a preparedness to accept judgements at some future time by people who don't actually know much about them or the learning contexts. People face future judgement with trepidation, especially if it by strangers. (That is true even though people are acquire prepared to judge others.)

Taking all that into account it is reasonable to assert that a significant reason for shortfalls in student performance is significantly due to the influence of politicians and parents. None of this is to criticize the people who compile the PISA and TIMSS results who are extremely competent with a level of patience in the face of complex data. (Unfortunately their opinion is seldom sought!) As others have observed those with most influence have much less knowledge than those who are the subject of the policies.

#### *Accountability and transparency*

The most important four reasons given by teachers as reasons for leaving the profession are heavy workload, poor work/life balance, stress and professional regulation. Now consider the responses of ministers.

In at least one jurisdiction it has been recruitment of graduates who are near completion of their degree (Teach for Australia), a system shown by competent research in the US to not improve teaching and in any event privileges content over pedagogy. Next, performance pay which has been demonstrated to be anathema to professionals and anyway requires matching performance of one teacher rather than all the other teachers over the student's life. It isn't necessary to deal with mandatory reporting: if performance is to be assessed it should be through a process which the teacher trusts! As in any organisation.

#### *Lessons from other countries*

There is another general point which significantly lessens the progress. There is very often a seeming reluctance to consider what is going on in other countries. Though there is awareness of the system in Finland, because of its high ranking in early PISA tests, that does not extend to an identification of what lessons might be learned. Australia is not alone in this. Besides Finland, small and large countries offer important lessons.

Amongst the countries are Singapore, admittedly a city state, Canada and some European countries whose students have achieved improved PISA scores in recent times. Hopefully, the US is not looked to as any guide: its education system is amongst the worst in the world, like its health system, and is amongst the most expensive and demands more teacher hours than in most other countries. The OECD carefully analysed the lessons to be learned in a special report directed to the United States in 2009. It was ignored! That report, by the way, is an extraordinary source of information about how various education systems work. Has every education minister read that report?



It should be noted that in many countries, including Finland, student achievement as measured by PISA has, like that of Australian students, declined somewhat. The results from TIMSS don't show significant declines. In fact they show small improvements. And NAPLAN results in general show some improvement over the period it has been running; highlighting spelling failures and taking those out of context, as has recently occurred, doesn't really help does it?

#### *Economic impact*

The proposition is often asserted that Australia's GDP would improve substantially if students improved their test scores. (There are aspects of that argument traversed in this second report.)

The link between student achievement and economic gain, was asserted by economist Eric Hanushek who called for reform of the US school education system. His assertion was due to the short run of data. The longer run shows no such relationship. If Australia's economic achievement was to be improved the current performance of economic entities should be looked at: Australian business management ranks 58th in the World and economic performance is actually by no means spectacular, to put it mildly!

And if student achievement is to be the focus for improvement then equity in the distribution of funding to various school sectors, levels of which in Australia are amongst the worst of OECD countries, as shown by PISA/OECD reports, should be addressed. Numerous education researchers such as Trevor Cobbold have been pointing that out for years since the first Gonski Report and the undermining of it by successive governments, especially Conservative governments!

Early childhood is absolutely critical: it is the time of greatest brain expansion and cognitive growth and the time when understandings of relationships and the important of self-control and self-confidence are developed. These are influenced by such things as the nature of parenting and the economic and behavioural factors which apply at the time. The outcomes strongly influence the child's future including social inclusion and mental health and, importantly, the attitude to learning.

The availability and diversity of activities is greater in families with higher SES backgrounds. That is why access to free or heavily subsidized early child education and care is most critical at this socioeconomic level.

The stresses on young families can be extreme. Elaboration is unnecessary. But unless the most significant of those are addressed there will likely be damaging outcomes evident in later life. ECRC, increases health and employment and reduces crime.

Students from low SES backgrounds achieve higher learning outcomes when their class is higher SES and vice versa, high SES students achieve less in a class of lower SES.

As students approach adolescence their attention to social and relational issues increase. The influence of social media has increased and in some cases become dangerous.

#### *Conclusions*

The following are the areas requiring urgent attention.

Early Childhood: If genuine improvement in teaching and learning is to be achieved several major issues need to be addressed. After almost 20 years of extensive literature research I believe unequivocally that the first issue is early childhood including the availability of education and care centres, especially to less advantaged families and the pressures on young families, especially economic pressures and the discrimination against women whose unpaid contribution is ignored when conditions are placed on receipt of subsidy. The behaviour of providers of course needs attention: the exploitation of opportunities through investment in centres by venture capital entities borders on the obscene!

Equity: Secondly, equity in distribution of funding needs to be achieved. The present situation, amplified by decisions of the Morrison government is untenable! It has got worse since the Gonski reports, not better. Financial support for schools which allow parents to choose schools on the basis of faith or other fundamental concerns is important but it absolutely should not mean the deprivation of adequate funding to government schools.

Ministers and teachers: Thirdly, ministers need to inform themselves of what is really understood from the huge amount of high-quality research.

Equally, the opportunities for teachers to gain understanding from research should be substantially increased through provision of study time. Whether the establishment of an organisation that gathers and analyses and distributes that is helpful is moot! In what other professional area does that occur? If the real role of school principals as learning leaders was recognised, understanding would be advanced, as in any professional organisation, through discussion groups and seminars and encouragement to update learning.

What goes on in schools: Fourthly, the understandings and acknowledgement of what actually goes on in schools, in the way that staff work and in the learning environment of the classroom, must be a focus for ministers and those charged with policies which determine the education systems. The huge reliance on metrics is unhelpful! Numbers help but they very often don't reveal what is really important.

Consider the situation in many other sectors such as the health system: have the metrics help identify problems in the relationships between doctors and nurses in task distribution? Have the alleged efficiencies achieved by entry of private providers into the sector improved the level of care? Certainly they have not in the aged care sector where the problems are notorious.

In the education sector where the outcomes, like the health sector, have a high influence on the overall wellness of the community, the commitment must be to genuine understanding and indeed to skills in counterfactual reasoning, so common in very young children, but scarce in many ideologically driven adults.

Unless the essential issues are addressed the education system is doomed to fail!

The second report of the Gonski Inquiry, titled in a way that suggests the title of this Productivity Commission report, deals with a very large number of the issues most important to improving the achievement of schools.

I attach one of the several essays from my website, [www.desgriffin.com](http://www.desgriffin.com), dealing with universities.

I refer also to four essays: [Best Teaching Part 1](#): How teachers make a difference – John Hattie; [Best Teaching Part 2](#): Graham Nuthall, What goes on in the classroom and how do children learn?; [Best Teaching Part 3](#): Lauren Resnick & Accountable Talk + Stephen Raudenbush – More from Chicago; [Best Teaching Part 4](#): Jonathan Osborne, Argumentation and a Science Curriculum; and last [Organising Schools for Improvement](#): Lessons from Chicago