



Australian  
Association for  
Research in  
Education

Submission to  
the Productivity  
Commission  
Inquiry into the  
National  
Education  
Evidence Base

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## The Australian Association for Research in Education

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) is the national professional association for fostering educational research in Australia. AARE facilitates contact between educational researchers and supports the development of high quality educational research. We have approximately 700 members, the majority of whom are based in Australian universities, but our membership base also includes members of state and national education bureaucracies, independent and consultant researchers, and teachers and school leaders. Importantly, our members conduct a very broad range of educational research, and approach research problems in education from diverse philosophical, epistemological and methodological standpoints.

## Our Interest in this Inquiry

Consistent with the Association's mission to support high quality educational research to enhance the public good in Australia, we are interested in supporting the public understanding of what constitutes good evidence in the realm of education. We are also interested in ensuring that education data is used wisely, validly and in ways consistent with the intent of its collection, ensuring that the outstanding educational research conducted in Australia is acknowledged and utilised as an important part of the national education evidence base.

## What constitutes good evidence in education?

It would be nice if all of the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through IBM machines and draw charts as the economists do. However, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. (Cameron, 1963, p.13)

Cameron's maxim, often mistakenly attributed to Einstein, holds true to the present day in relation to education. One of the key concerns of the Productivity Commission lies around the characteristics of educational data and the types of data required to improve education outcomes in Australia. While we do not dispute the usefulness of large national datasets in providing answers to some critical questions about education, we are mindful that these do not on their own necessarily constitute good evidence. The issue of what constitutes good evidence in education depends largely upon the scope and context of the research, the use of appropriate methodology and on constructive alignment between these and the knowledge claims that are produced. NAPLAN data, for example, provides a useful picture of broad national achievement on literacy and numeracy for Australian school students, and in this realm might be said to constitute good evidence, while at the same time it constitutes poor evidence when used as a proxy for teacher or school quality (Wu, 2016). Valid use of evidence is essen-

tial to prevent unintended outcomes and perverse practices as has been found with the misuse of NAPLAN data (Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016).

A variety of different types of evidence, inclusive of but not limited to experimental and case study research (as nominated in the Issues Paper) is required, and at all times the limitations of such evidence needs to be acknowledged in its use.

### **Attending to the local**

We need to be wary of data that purports to provide a watertight ‘solution’ to any of the ‘wicked problems’ of education, which is in its nature a ‘messy’ and human process, mitigated always by local context. While randomised controlled trials have been privileged in various jurisdictions around the world as the benchmark for high quality education research (see, for examples, Goldacre 2013), and we do not dispute their usefulness in particular circumstances, we are also mindful of the need for research such as this to be supplemented with evidence of different kinds that attend to the local, contextual and explanatory. Lee Cronbach, a giant of the fields of developmental psychology and statistics, wrote in 1975: “when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalisation is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion” (p.125). In a similar vein, internationally recognised scholar of assessment and measurement Dylan Wiliam has recently argued that “In education, ‘What works?’ is rarely the right question, because everything works somewhere, and nothing works everywhere, which is why in education, the right question is, ‘Under what conditions does this work?’” (Wiliam, 2014, p.4).

It is essential for discussions of the national education evidence base to take the limits of generalisation across vastly different educational contexts into account, and to recognise the importance of understanding the interplay between education outcomes and local context.

### **Educational research for the public good**

While the proportion of national research funding spent on education is pitifully small (Graham and Buckley (2014) found that educational researchers were the recipients of 1.33% of the entire funding pool for ARC Discovery Projects in 2014 and 1.94% of the total ARC Linkage Projects budget for 2015), some outstanding educational research is produced in Australia. Increasingly, however, education research generated by think tanks and private consulting firms is used as the ‘evidence base’ for policy development, as demonstrated in recent AITSL policy documents around teacher professional development, for example (Australian

Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012a, 2012b). While we do not dispute that research generated outside the academy can be both legitimate and useful, Australia has a vibrant academic education research community that constitutes a 'broad church'. We are proud of the diversity of education research undertaken in Australia, which is conducted utilising a vast range of tools, methods and methodologies, with the overarching aim of serving Australian children and young people and in doing so enhancing the public good.

Members of the Australian educational research community remain keen to continue to make a contribution to the national education evidence base, and through it, to policy making and developments in education. Our knowledge and expertise will be put to best use if an expansive view of evidence is taken; if different types of data are valued in ways consistent with the knowledge claims to which they lend; and if educational research emanating from our universities, while not always providing the 'comfort of certainty', is valued appropriately for its contribution to the improvement of Australian education.

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