

INPUTS TO OUTCOMES? PERCEPTIONS OF THE EVOLUTION OF COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT POLICY APPROACHES TO OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION (1985-1996)

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Coalition Government came to office in March 1996, the Commonwealth's policy agenda for schools has focused closely on the establishment of a National Literacy and Numeracy Goal, national benchmarks for student achievement and targets for performance against national goals for schooling. Given the relative speed of developments in this area, one may be excused for thinking that this was exclusively the agenda of the current government. Yet a review of Commonwealth policies for schools over more than a decade suggests otherwise. Since the mid-1980s there has been a shift in emphasis away from focusing on inputs to schooling to focusing on educational outputs and outcomes. This shift has been reflected in Commonwealth and State policy developments and, in particular, in nationally collaborative work undertaken on curriculum statements and profiles for Australian schools. Were it not for developments under the previous federal Labor government, the current government's push for benchmarking and measurement of the outcomes of schooling might not have progressed as far as it has today.

This paper examines the evolution of the Commonwealth government's policy focus on outcomes-based education (OBE) between 1985 and 1996. This policy focus was pursued in the context of the Commonwealth's broad agenda for schooling which, in the late 1980s and 1990s, encompassed:

- promoting student outcomes through raising school retention rates;
- targeting disadvantaged groups through equity programs;
- establishing national goals for schooling;
- promoting greater national consistency in curriculum and assessment;
- enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in schools;
- facilitating better vocational pathways; and
- improving national reporting on the outcomes of schooling.

Collaborative work undertaken by the Commonwealth, States and Territories between 1988 and 1993 on national curriculum statements and profiles was particularly important in moving the focus from *program* or *system-level* outcomes (in the late 1980s) to *student* outcomes (in the 1990s).

The research project

This paper draws on a wider research project which investigates Commonwealth government policies to promote the quality of school education between 1987 and 1996. The study involved document analysis and fifty semi-structured interviews with State and Commonwealth Education Ministers, State and Commonwealth bureaucrats, teacher unions, teacher professional associations, school principals, teacher educators, education consultants and commentators and a business/industry representative. The interviews investigated the Commonwealth's construction of a 'quality agenda' for schools (including policy meanings, origins, influences, roles and processes). The shift to an outcomes focus features prominently in the interview data as a major conceptualisation of quality and influence on Commonwealth policy initiatives to promote the quality of schooling. Informants described this shift in positive and in negative terms.

This paper first examines the shift to OBE through the literature and documentary sources, then draws on informant perspectives from this research project. In the discussion which follows 'inputs' are defined (after Marginson, 1993, p.90) as 'the resources used to produce education' (e.g. staff, buildings, land, equipment, learning materials); 'outputs' are the products of education (e.g. the number of students enrolled, the number of students reaching Year 12, the services of teaching and learning). 'Outcomes' are defined in various different ways in the literature - in itself an indication of how the focus on outcomes has evolved over time. According to Willis and Kissane (1997, p.5), 'student outcomes' may refer to class- institution- or system-level performance indicators (e.g. distribution of test results, course completion rates, or post-course destination of students). Student outcomes may also describe the actual capabilities (knowledge, understanding, competencies, orientations, etc.) students should develop as a result of their school education. Either use of the term 'student outcomes' implies a statement of educational objectives and an indication of the extent to which these educational objectives have been achieved.

The shift to OBE: influences on policy

Economic, social and ideological changes were occurring in Australia in the early 1980s which had a significant impact on the wider policy context and on education. Two government reports reflect the policy context and the Commonwealth's changing focus. The first was the Karmel Report, *Schools in Australia* (Karmel, 1973), and the second, the Report of the Quality of Education Review Committee (QERC), *Quality of Education in Australia* (Karmel, 1985).

The Karmel Report (1973)

The Karmel Report (1973) was a seminal report which established the basis of Commonwealth provision for school education on the principle of 'need'. It was commissioned by the incoming Whitlam Government which had campaigned for increased equality of opportunity through education. The report revealed gross deficiencies in the resourcing of many schools around Australia - a fact which had been drawn to the Commonwealth's attention over a decade of lobbying by parents and education systems. The Karmel Report was underpinned by a commitment to promoting equality of outcomes in schooling by making the 'overall circumstances of children's education as nearly equal as possible' (p.139). Higher levels of resourcing were therefore needed to address existing deficiencies in schools. The inadequate training and development of teachers, outdated curricula and teaching methods, a lack of shared decision-making within schools and in community involvement in school affairs needed to be addressed (p.139).

The Commonwealth's response to improving the quality of schools after 1973 was through inputs - general resourcing programs (recurrent and capital) and specific purpose funding programs which sought to redress disadvantage, promote teacher development and innovation. The Karmel Report (1973) resulted in a massive expansion of Commonwealth funding to schools. Within two years, Commonwealth spending on schools grew from \$364 million to nearly \$1.1 billion (Marginson, 1997, p.46).

The impact of the Karmel Report (1973) was far-reaching. It reinforced the Commonwealth's policy and funding role in school education and established a system of funding that was still in operation two decades later. Whether the Karmel Report (1973) focused solely on inputs and not on outcomes is a matter for debate, as this research shows. The outcomes of schooling were broadly conceived in the report in terms of 'the acquisition of skills and knowledge, initiation into the cultural heritage, the valuing of rationality and the broadening of opportunities to respond to and participate in artistic endeavours' (Karmel, 1973, p.14). The lack of focus in the report on the economic benefits of schooling was significant (Karmel, 1998, p.11). This was, however, consistent with the progressivist educational philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s which focused instead on the needs of the individual child and on social justice within society. Lokan (1997, p.1) notes that this focus was input-oriented to the extent that there was a belief 'student learning would improve through having professionally educated teachers working at a local level to develop the most appropriate curriculum and program for each child'.

The QERC Report (1985)

By 1985 the connections between education, the labour market and the economy were becoming apparent. Economic downturn between 1975 and 1985 had resulted in high unemployment in Australia (10.4 per cent), particularly for young people (23 per cent). Education was seen as crucial to economic competitiveness, economic reconstruction, and micro-economic reform (Marginson, 1997, p.151).

In this economic climate, the Commonwealth government had to re-consider its level of resource input to schooling. The debate now focused on diminishing and not expanding resources, and on an increasing concern to ensure 'value for money' in a context of public expenditure restraint. The report of the Quality of Education Review Committee (QERC), *Quality of education in Australia* (Karmel, 1985), was commissioned to advise on the 'priority of attaining higher basic skills standards' in primary schools and the 'need to ensure that strongly rising participation in Years 11 and 12 is associated with the attainment of appropriate standards relevant to subsequent employment opportunities and improved preparation for tertiary education' (McGaw, 1994, p.2).

The QERC report took up the issue of quality in schooling in a substantially different way to the earlier Karmel Report (1973). The QERC Report (Karmel, 1985, pp.2-3) noted that many of the deficiencies in school resourcing identified by the earlier Karmel Report had been overcome. It signalled a move to a greater focus on outcomes rather than inputs in the provision of funding, and on the effectiveness and efficiency of programs. This move reflects what Lokan (1997, p.1) describes as the 'paradigm shift from focusing on individual students as learners to an economics-driven concern with achieving pre-specified outcomes', which occurred in the 1980s. The QERC Report (1985, p.70) stated that outcomes were to be defined in terms of 'competences' all students should acquire, encompassing the ability to use knowledge and skills effectively to achieve a range of purposes. The report noted the lack of outcomes data and 'mechanisms for systematic recording of output information' (p.25). Although the Committee was interested in measurable outcomes, it did not favour the idea of national testing because its narrow focus on basic skills did not provide a 'definitive measure of the quality of schooling' (p.106). The Committee believed that its priorities for

improving the outcomes of education generally would lead towards a growing awareness of the importance of education. Schools could, however, assist in this process by providing more information about their achievements and opening themselves to evaluation (p.78). Performance through accountability was emphasised, rather than initial program goals or ideals based on inputs (Griffin and Batten, 1991, p.3; Karmel, 1985). There were also good arguments for an outcomes focus on equity grounds, based on a philosophy of equal opportunities: 'it was difficult to actually demonstrate the availability of opportunities or to measure educational access except in terms of outcomes' (Griffin and Batten, 1991, p.3).

The QERC Report (Karmel, 1985) is widely seen as the catalyst for a change of focus in Commonwealth government funding policies. Although the QERC Report did not result in adoption of the 'competences' as recommended - at least, not until the idea was taken up through the Mayer Report's (1992) 'key competencies'- it fostered a greater focus on outputs and outcomes rather than inputs. The QERC Report's recommendations sought to reduce the Commonwealth's direct control over targeted program funds (through the Commonwealth Schools Commission) and to increase States' and schools' responsibility for providing evidence of outcomes.

Economic pressures for a national approach to schooling

Economic pressures were a significant factor in moving towards a focus on educational outcomes. Australia's economic situation deteriorated steadily following the oil price shock of 1973. By the early 1980s there was general acknowledgement that profound economic, social and technological changes had widespread social and educational implications in Australia (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1983; Rizvi and Kemmis, 1987). The economic situation drew attention to the quality of schooling, the adequacy of levels of student performance and considerations of accountability (McGaw, 1994, p.1). Youth unemployment was, moreover, a significant public policy concern by the mid 1980s. Employers focused on school leavers' poor levels of competence in literacy and numeracy as evidence of a decline in the standard of education (Business Council of Australia, 1986). However, critics had little 'systematic evidence on which to rest their claims' (McGaw, 1991, p.135).

In its report *In the National Interest* (1987), the Commonwealth Schools Commission noted that there was some commonality of policy concern across Australia about secondary education, although different school systems seemed to be 'recommending different practices and structures to meet similar problems' (p.143). The report acknowledged the Commonwealth's responsibility to ensure 'that national education outcomes relate to national economic and social priorities' (p.122). It therefore advocated reform of secondary education through a 'national approach' involving Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. A national approach would provide for 'national goals and national reporting of progress' and promote national cohesion by concentrating on 'essential areas of the curriculum' and a 'secondary education credential with national currency' (p.124).

Public sector reform

The move to outcomes-based education was part of broader reforms in public sector management with the introduction of corporate management practices such as program budgeting, strategic planning and measurement using performance indicators. With these reforms there was an increasing emphasis in the education sector on value for money and improved educational outcomes.

At the Commonwealth level the focus of public sector reform was linked to restructuring of the national economy, achieving administrative efficiencies, improving budget processes,

policy coherence and coordination (Thompson, 1989; Yeatman 1990; Pusey 1991). In education this focus was most obvious in the push for greater accountability for government expenditure and streamlining of administrative arrangements for funding programs. Commonwealth and State Treasuries increasingly mounted cost-efficiency arguments designed to curb education expenditure. It became difficult for education authorities to argue for increased funding for schools without data to back their claims.

International trends

Education in Australia has long reflected international influences in terms of educational thinking and policy trends (Bartos, 1992). One of the most influential trends in the late 1980s was towards greater levels of measurement of the outcomes of schooling through the use of performance indicators. In Australia there was wide interest in the application of performance indicators to school improvement issues, program accountability, school evaluation and development, personnel appraisal, aspects of learning and equity issues (Wyatt and Ruby, 1990, p.xiii).

Internationally there was also a trend towards greater public accountability for education through national testing or assessment programs. These programs became a 'political imperative', replacing what were 'formerly seen as primarily professional and pedagogical concerns' (Nisbet, 1994, p.165, cited in Kennedy, 1995a, pp.4-5). In Australia there was long-standing opposition to programs of national testing from education systems, teacher unions and parents (Bartlett *et al.*, 1994). While education authorities introduced their own monitoring programs to assess outcomes, they nevertheless were suspicious of perceived attempts by the Commonwealth government to introduce national testing (p.39).

Ideological shifts

After 1985 Commonwealth involvement in school education was motivated less by the principle of funding based on 'need' (the legacy of Karmel, 1973) than by instrumentalist policies driven by economic concerns and fiscal restraint. This instrumentalism reflected wider changes to the political ideology underpinning government provision of services. The ideal of the welfare state and social democracy, the idea of strong public services and a society committed to collectivist values of social justice were all in retreat (Ife, 1997, p.23; Dudley and Vidovich, 1995, p.179). Instead, economic rationalism and human capital theory were seen to set the framework for government education policies, which increasingly reflected economic priorities (Marginson, 1993). Education was seen to be part of the broader social, political and economic agenda and not the sole preserve of professional educators or educational bureaucracies (Kennedy, 1995b, p.73). This contributed to tensions within the education community about the nature of reforms to education.

Commonwealth government initiatives

The move to a focus on outcomes-based education is set in a context of collaborative work involving the Commonwealth, States and Territories between 1988 and 1993 on national curriculum frameworks, proposals for different educational pathways, a common set of generic competencies to underpin the increased participation in Years 11 and 12 and the pedagogical and work organisation changes associated with these proposals (Ruby, 1993, p.1). The basic shift to thinking about curricula in terms of student learning outcomes was 'a very important, and novel, factor for Australian education in the national initiative of the late 1980s and early 1990s' (Lokan, 1997, p.iii).

The national collaborative effort in curriculum development had its origins in the June 1986 decision of the Australian Education Council (AEC) to promote a collaborative effort in order

to maximise scarce curriculum development resources and minimise unnecessary differences in curricula between the States (Kennedy, 1995c, p.154). This effort was given impetus by the Commonwealth Minister for Education, John Dawkins, following release of the Ministerial Statement, *Strengthening Australia's Schools* (1988). Developmental work on curriculum statements and profiles proceeded under the direction of the AEC's Curriculum and Assessment Committee (CURASS). Even though collaborative curriculum work ceased after July 1993, the Commonwealth provided funding between 1993 and 1996 through the National Professional Development Program (NPDP) to promote the uptake of the curriculum statements and profiles, key competencies and the teaching of accredited vocational education courses in schools. The overall aim of the program was to assist teachers in improving educational outcomes for young people. The NPDP enhanced teachers' levels of awareness of curriculum statements and profiles and assessment issues (National Curriculum Services, 1995), thus assisting the process of implementation of curriculum reforms. The National School English Literacy Survey (NSELS), a collaborative venture initiated and funded by the Commonwealth government between 1994 and 1997, was also a significant development towards focusing on individual student outcomes. The survey results were released by Dr Kemp in September 1997. They provided a sound research base for implementation of the current government's National Literacy and Numeracy Plan and the National Literacy and Numeracy Goal. This goal states 'that every child leaving primary school should be numerate and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level' (agreed at the March 1997 meeting of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, MCEETYA).

The most significant Commonwealth government initiatives in the late 1980s and 1990s which are relevant to the shift to outcomes-based education therefore include:

- the Ministerial Statement by the Hon. J.S. Dawkins, *Strengthening Australia's Schools* (1988);
- agreement by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments on the *Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling* (The Hobart Declaration, 1989), including
- identification of eight broad areas of learning and commissioning of statements and profiles in each area;
- collaborative curriculum development work undertaken by the Commonwealth, States and Territories, including
- a national curriculum mapping exercise (1988-1991) and development of national statements and profiles (1989-1993);
- collaborative work to develop and trial the Mayer Report's (1992) Key Competencies;
- National Professional Development Program (1994-1996); and
- National Schools English Literacy Survey (1994-1996).

The wider research project (to which this paper relates) draws on the research literature and interview data in highlighting the significance of the following features of the policy process between 1988 and 1996:

- while many policy initiatives were instigated by the Commonwealth government, they were nevertheless developed collaboratively at a *national* level (e.g. curriculum statements and profiles, key competencies, NSELS);
- overall a broad range of stakeholders was involved in developing and implementing these initiatives (State and Territory education systems, non-government education systems, teacher unions, teacher professional associations, parent groups);

- there were significant points at which agreement was reached with major stakeholders (in particular, through MCEETYA);
- there were incentives for involvement and implementation through funding initiatives (e.g. under the NPDP, Key Competencies Program, NSELS).

The significance of these features of the policy process in terms of the shift to an outcomes-based approach to education is examined in the following sections which report on interview informants' perspectives.

Informants' perspectives on the shift to outcomes-based education

While government documents and the wider literature are informative about the shift to outcomes-based education in Australia, there is much which can be learned from policy actors/stakeholders on this topic. Perspectives are drawn from interviews with informants to the wider research project described earlier. The move to an outcomes focus in education was a major theme in this research.

The research indicates that among the different groups interviewed, there are both positive and negative views on the way in which OBE has evolved in Australia. To a certain extent these views are influenced by the extent to which groups saw themselves as involved in the process of moving towards OBE. The educational argument for an outcomes-based approach to education is perhaps more widely accepted by the education community than the political or economic motivation. This came through most clearly in perspectives offered by school principals and parent group representatives. Whether or not they agreed with educational, political or economic motivations, State and Commonwealth bureaucrats identified closely with the push for outcomes data, which they saw as the major manifestation of the shift to OBE. Some States and Territories were well ahead of the Commonwealth government in terms of their understanding of ways of measuring outcomes and were therefore in favour of this move. While there was much information-sharing on how to go about measuring and reporting outcomes, there were tensions at political and administrative levels over the extent of reporting required by the Commonwealth government. The way in which the Commonwealth sought to introduce certain policy initiatives was also considered controversial - for example, the Commonwealth government's announcement of National Schools English Literacy Survey in the Government's White Paper on Unemployment and Growth, *Working Nation* (Keating, 1994), without prior consultation with the States and Territories.

Perspectives offered by interview informants are set out below under a number of dominant themes, expressed as propositional statements. Direct quotations from interview transcripts have been included in italics, noting the informant's professional or organisational position.

The focus on outcomes was not new

Many informants reacted negatively to the suggestion that the Commonwealth government's approach to schooling from 1973 had focused on inputs to schooling and not on outcomes. Informants were generally of the view that there had always been a focus on outcomes, even though outcomes were broadly conceived in the Karmel Report (1973).

Economic restructuring was a catalyst for change

While many informants agreed that the QERC Report (Karmel, 1985) was a catalyst for change, some felt the report reflected '*what had been happening for some time*' (parent

group representative). One former senior Commonwealth government official described the shift in thinking from inputs to outputs and outcomes as '*radical*'. The deteriorating economy and economic restructuring in the mid to late 1980s were seen as the main catalyst for change. Economic and administrative restructuring were perceived to be based on an economic rationalist approach to public policy and government expenditure.

The move to OBE was politically inspired

The move to OBE was seen by one former Commonwealth government official to be politically, rather than educationally, inspired: '*I think one of reasons that the notion of outcomes changed was actually a political desire to separate the question of outcomes from inputs*'.... '*there was that political dimension to get people off talking about inputs*'. The input argument that more resources would result in greater levels of quality simply did not hold where there was no evidence of improvement in student outcomes. Parents, teachers and administrators suddenly found that they could not use 'input' or 'process' arguments in relation to education (former senior State government official).

The shift to an outcomes focus was supported by accountability arguments

By the 1980s there was '*greater public rationality*' about the purposes of schooling and a recognition of the need for information on schooling outcomes (senior Commonwealth government official). The notion that governments put in money to "fix" a problem resulted in the sort of thinking which favoured a focus on outcomes: '*If we're going to put this money in, what sort of outcome are we going to see?*' (senior State government official). This reinforced the accountability argument for a focus on program-level outcomes. As one parent group representative noted, however, this approach often ignored the complexity of policy problems (e.g. the inter-generational effects of poverty and its impact on student outcomes). Added to the accountability argument was the need for economic restraint and closer scrutiny of expenditure. Declining State and Commonwealth education budgets in turn reinforced the need for greater accountability for government expenditure.

The educational arguments for outcomes became skewed by the focus on reporting

Those informants who focused more on the educational arguments for OBE did so in terms of measures of quality improvement in '*what students know and what they are expected to do in terms of skill development*' (an education consultant). However, informants who are closely involved with schools (principals, parents, program coordinators) felt that after 1985 the meaning of outcomes became '*skewed*' and '*narrowed by the focus on measurement of outcomes*' (parent group representative). A school principal expressed the view that while there was a good argument for improving education through an emphasis on outcomes, in schools the focus was '*still on the reporting of outcomes and not on quality*'. Outcomes had come to mean '*what we can measure*'. This emphasis was controversial with teachers, unions and parents' organisations. One former senior State government official spoke of the '*emotional reaction against assessing students in students in schools*', which made the use of outcomes data very '*political*'.

Measurement by outcomes was a form of control

A former senior State government official saw in the Commonwealth's agenda the desire for greater control and '*steering through outcomes measures*' - a reference to Kickert's (1991) notion of 'steering at a distance', whereby States' autonomy to deliver services is balanced and controlled by tighter accountability measures (cited in Knight and Lingard, 1997, p.42). Inevitably, there were tensions between the Commonwealth and States over the push for greater accountability. Since system-level outcomes data were seen as the '*report card*' for

education in the States/Territories, there was always the potential for negative exposure of State governments (former senior State government official).

Parent groups expressed reservations about the move to OBE in terms of 'control'. Parents were not opposed to an emphasis on outcomes; however, they were concerned that *'schools shouldn't become too locked in'* to outcomes frameworks (parent group representative). They wanted greater flexibility in schools. Outcome measures at the State level were also seen to disempower teachers because outcomes and outputs were not linked to *'conditions, contexts and processes'* (former senior State government official). One former State government official saw the move to an outcomes focus as a *'sea change'* which affected not only educational discourse, but also the participation of various groups (e.g. parents) in educational decision-making. The discourse of educational provision changed radically, marginalising their arguments for greater inputs.

Equity considerations were a strong motivator in the move to OBE

While it may be argued that the outcomes focus was an economic rationalist push for greater accountability of government expenditure, some informants (mainly State and Commonwealth government officials) stated that equity considerations were a motivation for outcomes-based approaches. Influential people such as Laurie Carmichael and John Dawkins were very concerned about the lack of outcomes data in the late 1980s. According to one senior State government official, Laurie Carmichael (then head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions) was *'one of the first key people on the Labor side of politics who started to talk about outputs and demanded results for the 'sons and daughters of the working class'*. As the Commonwealth Minister for Education, John Dawkins was keenly aware of the lack of nationally and internationally comparable outcomes data in Australia. However, he was also *'genuinely concerned about educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups'* and wanted to know whether equity programs really *'made a difference'* (former Commonwealth government official).

Equity activists within Commonwealth and State bureaucracies saw the need for outcomes data if they were to substantiate their case for more funding for disadvantaged groups. One long-time State government 'equity activist' explained that he had been collecting data on specific groups in order to bolster his case for more funding with the State Treasury.

A parent group representative expressed the view that the emphasis on accountability and outcomes during the late 1980s and early 1990s was *'tempered by a view that schooling had a lot to do with social justice'* and the goal of *'outcomes for all'*. This meant that the push for outcomes' measures did not seem as *'extreme'* then as it does now.

Perspectives on the Commonwealth's approach to OBE

Informants noted with varying emphasis the importance of Commonwealth initiatives outlined earlier. While many acknowledged the significance of the Commonwealth government's role in moving towards OBE, some informants were keen to emphasise that the agenda was not simply Commonwealth-driven.

The contribution of the States/Territories to the evolution of OBE must be acknowledged

Both Commonwealth and State government officials were quick to acknowledge the contribution of the States and Territories to developments in OBE. Many States were 'way

ahead' of the Commonwealth in their level of knowledge and understanding about outcome measures (former State government official). A good deal of information-sharing took place on what kinds of data were kept and what data were required. While the Commonwealth was involved in this information-sharing, *'it did not necessarily take a leadership role'* (former senior State government official).

Some informants also argued that the evolution of the focus on outcomes from system-or program-level outcomes to student outcomes must be credited to developments in the States. A former State minister and his adviser argued that Commonwealth policies did not focus sufficiently on individual student learning outcomes; rather they focused on outcomes at a program level. In some States the focus on outcomes had already moved from the system level and program level to schools and finally to students. One former senior State government official saw this focus evolving from an emphasis on strategic planning and evaluation in the 1980s: *'evaluation was a systematic approach to it across schools, so you would be asking, "Are we achieving these objectives in terms of individual schools?" But in terms of individual schools you would say, "What does that mean at the school level?" And it means improving student outcomes.'*

Some States had instituted outcomes reporting *'long before the Commonwealth got into the game'* (former senior Commonwealth government official) using their own testing programs - for example, the Basic Skills test in New South Wales and the LAP test in Victoria. However, the States and Territories were interested in collecting outcomes data for their own purposes; they remained politically opposed to national testing programs which allowed for cross-state comparisons. Given this history of opposition to national testing, the fact that the States and Territories were able to come to an agreement with the Commonwealth on the development and implementation of a *national* literacy survey and later, a national literacy benchmark, is remarkable.

The Commonwealth's main contribution was in terms of a 'national approach'

A senior State government official described the Commonwealth's national approach to schooling as a *'change agenda'* or a *'reform agenda'*. Part of this agenda was *'to get agreements about objectives and outcomes that the States would sign on for...increasing educational outcomes, lifting student achievement'*. In this regard, the *Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling* (otherwise known as the Hobart Declaration, 1989) are acknowledged as an important step in reaching agreement with the States and Territories on a national approach to schooling. The Hobart Declaration is regarded by many informants (mainly policy-makers at State and Commonwealth levels) as more than a 'symbolic' policy gesture. Reaching agreement on the policy agenda and national goals for schooling meant that the agenda could then move forward through collaborative work. One former senior Commonwealth official even expressed the view that the Hobart Declaration forced the States and Territories into collaboration - there was no turning back. Some informants felt that the fact that the national goals for schooling had been revisited in the Adelaide Declaration (April 1999) indicated that an overarching agreement on a national approach to schooling remained as significant today as it was ten years ago.

The Commonwealth's role in monitoring educational outcomes at a national level was also acknowledged. As one national education union official stated: *'...education in this country is richer if you have actually got a national government committed to a national focus, to ensuring all the stakeholders are involved, to essentially plotting or managing, if you like, the international trends. Are you apprised of them, are they relevant, are we ahead of them?'* This role was seen as an important one for the Commonwealth, particularly in the late 1980s.

The Commonwealth government promoted collaboration, amid controversy, in its approach to OBE

While controversial, the collaborative curriculum development work undertaken by the Commonwealth, States and Territories through CURASS led to the development of national curriculum statements and profiles. Although collaborative work on the statements and profiles ceased after the July 1993 AEC meeting, versions of these frameworks were eventually implemented in the States and Territories. This work is widely seen as significant by Commonwealth and State officials and representatives of the education community. One former Commonwealth official described the work on curriculum frameworks as *'the platform for everything that has happened today'*, while a senior State official described them as *'the progenitor of the subsequent movement by Kemp to establish national benchmarks'*.

Many informants expressed the view that the regular meetings and sharing of ideas between Commonwealth and State officers over curriculum matters were very important in reaching a common understanding on the need for *'consistency in curriculum'* and *'cost-sharing'* at a time of declining State education budgets.

Adequate consultation was seen as vital to the policy process (State and Commonwealth government officials, teacher professional associations). A national approach to OBE could not be achieved without seeking the agreement of the major parties at strategic points in the process of policy development. Several informants acknowledged the important role of AEC and MCEETYA in providing a forum for collaborative activity and agreement (State and Commonwealth government officials). Two informants noted the controversy surrounding the announcement of the NSELS in *Working Nation* (1994) without prior consultation with the States and Territories. According to one former senior Commonwealth government official, the States and Territories were upset at the Commonwealth government's announcement of the survey and its assumption that it could use *'their teachers, schools and students'*. However, very *'delicate negotiations'* over a six month period helped to ensure the States' involvement. The collaborative process of developing the methodology for the survey and implementing it in each State and Territory, followed by a large-scale professional development program, helped to ensure its success (former Commonwealth official, teacher union and teacher professional association representative). Many informants agreed that incentives were helpful in bringing the States and Territories 'on board'.

Many informants agreed that a national approach to reporting on educational outcomes had been important in moving towards OBE. A major outcome for the Commonwealth of the Hobart Declaration (1989) was agreement on collaboration with the States and Territories to produce an Annual National Report on Schooling in Australia (ANR). Collaborative negotiation of data by the Commonwealth, States and Territories through AEC and MCEETYA Taskforces has been an important feature of the ANR process. A parallel but separate data collection exercise was instituted by the Council of Australian Governments in 1993 - the Industry Commission's *Review of Government Service Provision*. According to one informant who is closely involved with MCEETYA, the ANR involves much more of a collective, consensual process of negotiation around the provision of data (and what kind of data) than the Industry Commission's review. This review negotiates the collection of data in a bilateral manner with each State/Territory.

The Commonwealth's policy emphasis on the 'quality of teaching and learning' was important

The emphasis placed by the Commonwealth government on promoting the 'quality of teaching and learning' provided a good counter-foil to the more 'hard-nosed' emphasis on accountability in moving towards OBE. The addition of 'learning' to 'quality teaching' has

been attributed to the influence of teacher unions, in particular the Australian Education Union (senior Commonwealth government official). Measures to promote the quality of 'teaching and learning', such as professional development funding through the NPDP, focused on improving student outcomes. Considerations of the pedagogic and work organisation implications of outcomes-based approaches to school education were foremost in the minds of senior Commonwealth officials in developing policy initiatives in the 1990s (former senior Commonwealth government official).

The Commonwealth's emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning also acknowledged that the success of reforms rested with teachers and schools. As one school principal noted: *We have a whole new vocabulary surrounding [accountability and outcomes] and there's been some recognition that teacher quality was a crucial element in producing acceptable and successful outcomes in education.* The provision of funding under the NPDP was important in moving forward the outcomes-oriented government agenda with teachers, teacher unions, teacher professional associations and universities. Other informants noted the importance of professional input to the development of the NSELS and of subsequent professional development and training for teachers administering the survey. This helped to maintain the '*educational integrity*' of the survey (former senior Commonwealth government official).

The collaborative work on curriculum statements and profiles spawned other collaborative initiatives which helped in moving forward the OBE agenda

Other Commonwealth policy initiatives arose as a result of collaborative development of the curriculum statements and profiles - in particular, on NSELS. Work on the profiles helped to initiate development of assessment materials, such as the Australian Council for Educational Research's Development Assessment Resource for Teachers (DART). A member of the NSELS Steering Committee was of the view that existence of the English Profile and the DART materials was a key factor in the development of the survey. The National English Profile formed the basis of the NSELS methodology while the DART materials were used in the survey's common assessment tasks. Without their existence, the survey might never have gone ahead.

Commonwealth funding for teacher professional associations under the National Professional Development Program also spawned a wide range of national, school-related initiatives which sought to improve students outcomes - for example, the Innovative Links Project (involving 16 university campuses and over 100 schools in action research projects) and the joint Australian Teaching Council/National Schools Network 'Professional Development Schools'.

Conclusions

This paper has drawn together findings from the literature, government documents and interview data. What can be learned from this research?

There has been an evolution in the focus on outcomes which can be attributed to the States and Territories as well as the Commonwealth

The focus on outcomes has gradually evolved from input-output arguments about funding provision and system- or program-level outcomes to a focus on individual student outcomes. This evolution came about through approaches promoted at State *and* Commonwealth levels. Collaborative work undertaken between 1988 and 1993 on national curriculum

statements and profiles is seen as particularly important in moving the focus from system- or program-level outcomes (in the late 1980s) to student outcomes (in the 1990s). The NSELS process was important in showing that it was possible to carry out a national sample survey with the cooperation of all the States and Territories.

What can we learn from this research about ways in which quality in schooling is conceptualised?

Quality is increasingly 'measured' in terms of outcomes. There is some agreement that quality was not talked about much until 'outcomes' were in vogue - quality could now be quantified through outcomes data. However, this research indicates there is some disquiet in the wider education community about this trend. People are concerned that the meaning of 'student outcomes' has been skewed by 'outcome measures' and that outcomes are increasingly stipulated in advance (through benchmarks and targets) without regard to the clientele in a school.

What can we learn about the processes involved in moving towards an outcomes-based approach?

Many parties need to be brought on board - States, Territories, non-government education systems, schools, principals, teachers, parents, students, teacher professional associations, teacher unions, teacher educators. While there have been significant concerns about policy initiatives (in particular, the development of national statements and profiles), collaborative approaches to policy development and implementation have nevertheless helped to bring relevant stakeholders along in the move to OBE. Funding incentives such as development of the curriculum statements and profiles, the NPDP and NSELS were important in engaging a wide range of stakeholders (especially teachers) in the OBE agenda. The focus on the 'quality of teaching and learning' also helped to acknowledge the role of teachers in promoting a focus on outcomes-based approaches in education.

The Commonwealth can claim credit for many of these initiatives. However, it cannot claim total credit for the OBE agenda. Some would say it is important **not** to claim an agenda as one's own. This can have political repercussions - as shown by the events of the July 1993 AEC meeting at which conservative States fought off what they perceived to be a Commonwealth-dominated agenda. Therefore, the contribution of all parties to a policy agenda must be acknowledged.

Finally, the research suggests that agreement between the major parties must be reached in order for policy initiatives to proceed. High-level forums such as MCEETYA are important sites for decision-making on significant national policy issues. The need for a broadly-based forum for negotiation and consultation on national policy issues, with representation from the education community, was also acknowledged in the research.

END NOTE

1. At the July 1993 meeting of the Australian Education Council (the peak ministerial body of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers), conservatives State Ministers voted to refer the national curriculum statements and profiles back to the States and Territories for further review.

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