

Aurora Education Foundation Submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement Interim Report consultation**Recommendations for the Interim Report**

Aurora Education Foundation (Aurora) recommends that the Productivity Commission (the Commission):

1. Notes that Aurora's RISE Project provides several insights and practical examples that are relevant to the Interim Report's information requests relating to Indigenous students
2. Consults directly with Aurora on the RISE Project as part of the development of the Final Report and the new National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)

Other recommendations for the next National School Reform Agreement

Aurora recommends that the Commission:

3. Investigate opportunities to enhance data sharing between Indigenous organisations and state/territory education departments and implement Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4
4. Incorporate Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance principles in the new NSRA
5. Investigate formal and informal streaming processes which limit ATAR eligibility for Indigenous students and mainstream pathways to higher education

About the Aurora Education Foundation

Aurora Education Foundation (Aurora) is an Indigenous organisation which delivers education and career services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the beginning of high school through to post-graduate study. Aurora's vision is a society in which Australia's First Peoples determine their own aspirations through education and life-long learning.

Aurora delivers four unique programs which span the educational career of Indigenous students: the High School Program (HSP); the Indigenous Scholarships Portal, the Internship Program; and the International Scholarships Program. The HSP is most relevant to this submission and is delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students in Western Sydney, Perth and the Southwest (WA). The HSP provides students with holistic, regular, and intensive cultural and academic support from the end of Year 7 through to one year post high school.

Comments on the Productivity Commission's Interim Report

Aurora provides qualified support for several draft recommendations and findings in the Commission's Interim Report. This support extends to the Commission's draft recommendations and findings relating to:

- the need for reforms which address the unique educational aspirations of Indigenous students (Draft findings 3.2 and 3.3)
- the recognition of Indigenous cultures and knowledges in schools (Draft finding 3.5)
- the use of shared decision-making and the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives in the design of education outcomes and policy (Draft finding 3.5)

- the incorporation of wellbeing as an outcome in the next NSRA (Draft recommendation 4.1), and
- the need to improve outcome measures in the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (MFSa) in consultation with Indigenous communities (Draft recommendation 7.2).

Aurora also welcomes the Commission's recognition of the harmful effects of deficit discourses in Indigenous education policy.

The Commission's draft recommendations and findings cover important themes that must be addressed in the effort to enhance the educational experience of Indigenous students. However, Aurora notes that these recommendations and findings can be developed further in the Commission's Final Report and the next NSRA. Aurora's RISE Project provides several insights and concrete examples which are relevant to the Commission's Interim Report and which should be taken into account in the development of the next NSRA.

The 'Redefining Indigenous Success in Education' (RISE) Project

Aurora's RISE Project is a five-year, multi-million-dollar initiative funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and developed in partnership with the Centre for Social Research Methods at the Australian National University. The aim of the RISE Project is to build on the evidence base of 'what works' in Indigenous education drawing on Indigenous definitions of 'success' in education.

The Indigenous education sector is heavily focused on service delivery with few resources allocated for service delivery organisations to capture data about what works. Understanding and learning from data is critical - and there are few areas more critical than Indigenous education.

The RISE Project has three key components:

1. A quasi-experimental, large-sample and longitudinal evaluation of three unique HSP program models which will generate one of the largest and most rigorous datasets on Indigenous education outcomes in Australia
2. An outcomes framework and data collection instruments grounded in Indigenous definitions of educational 'success'
3. An Indigenous Data Governance framework which will ensure that RISE data is controlled by Indigenous stakeholders and promotes their rights and interests

As part of the development of a RISE outcomes framework and data collection instruments, Aurora has undertaken a rigorous research process in partnership with the ANU to understand what 'success' in education means for Indigenous students and families. The following sub-sections explain the steps we have undertaken and highlight insights that are relevant to the Commission's Interim Report. These steps serve as a potential case study for how governments may incorporate Indigenous perspectives in the design of education outcomes as part of the new NSRA.

Literature review

Aurora and our ANU partners have undertaken a literature review on the following research question: 'How have Indigenous high school education outcomes been conceptualised and operationalised in the literature across Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada?'

Several findings from the literature review are directly relevant to the Commission's Interim Report. The literature review found no examples of Australian research which directly engages Indigenous

students and their families on how they define ‘success’ in education outside the remote context. Like the Interim Report, the literature review noted the predominance of deficit discourses within mainstream Indigenous education policy debates. Adding to the Interim Report, the literature review observed that displacing these discourses does not simply require a shift in semantics but a broader shift in power structures in the design of education policy and the inclusion of Indigenous communities in the creation, interpretation and use of education data.

The literature review categorised the literature on Indigenous education outcomes into three themes: academic outcomes; social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) outcomes; and cultural outcomes.

The literature review found that academic outcomes (including attendance) and a concomitant focus on parity currently dominate state and federal Indigenous education policy. While these outcomes are important, it was found that they are limited as measures of the educational performance of Indigenous students. Academic outcomes such as NAPLAN and ATAR carry cultural and linguistic biases and do not reflect the full intellectual capacity of students. Attendance and retention data – frequently cited in Indigenous education policy debates – are statistically unreliable, do not accurately measure educational engagement and conceal the complex factors that underlie Indigenous educational participation. As observed by the Shergold Review, current academic outcomes do not reflect the range of learning that occurs in schools or the skills and attributes that students require for economic and social participation. Further, the intensive focus on academic outcomes in the current NSRA has the potential to obscure unique Indigenous aspirations in education, promote ‘gap thinking’, and encourage streaming processes which limit Indigenous educational careers, discussed further below. One option for addressing some of the limitations of current approaches to measuring academic outcomes may be to adopt ‘Learner Profiles’ which are developed by Indigenous students and incorporate Indigenous cultural competencies (Rec 16 of Shergold Review).

While the relevance of SEWB as an outcome in education is increasingly discussed, the literature review found few examples of Australia research which sought to operationalise SEWB as an education outcome in general and fewer examples which sought to do so in the Indigenous context. The literature review cautioned against assumptions of universality in measuring SEWB and noted that SEWB outcomes which apply to Indigenous students should be informed by cultural values and developed in consultation with Indigenous communities. The literature review also noted that research on SEWB outcomes in Indigenous education was further developed in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand (for example, see First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model from Canada).

The literature review identified a significant body of Indigenous-led research highlighting the importance of culture in education. However, very few examples of literature which sought to operationalise Indigenous cultural outcomes were identified. It was noted that the operationalisation of cultural outcomes provides risks and opportunities and should be approached with careful consideration. On one hand, measuring cultural outcomes has the potential to make Indigenous educational priorities more visible in policy making. On the other hand, the measurement of culture risks diminishing Indigenous cultural meanings and exposing Indigenous communities to additional layers of surveillance and control. Recent Indigenous development research including the *Mabu Liyan* framework provide guidance for how these tensions may be addressed in the education context.

Qualitative interviews and participatory diagramming

Aurora and our ANU partners have undertaken qualitative interviews with existing HSP students, their parents/carers and Aurora alumni on the theme of ‘success’ in education. This activity also included participatory diagramming with students. This involved students visualising which education outcomes are most important to them, which outcomes are connected, and how outcomes relate to

their experience of being Indigenous within a mainstream education system – namely, their ‘two worlds’ identity.

In qualitative interviews, students emphasised:

- the importance of personal growth and development,
- the link between education and a desire to give back to their families and communities,
- a strong desire to learn about culture and identity,
- the importance of school as an opportunity to pursue chosen careers,
- the importance of peers as a support network at school; and
- the link between learning about culture, gaining a stronger sense of identity and becoming confident.

Student diagrams reveal the complexity of the relationship between educational success and the ‘two worlds’ identity of many Indigenous students, with education serving an instrumental role in enabling students to access mainstream opportunities while also giving back to family and community. Student diagrams also reveal a high degree of connectivity across academic, SEWB and cultural outcomes. Relatedly, Aurora alumni – some of whom have achieved qualifications at some of the world’s leading universities – placed importance on opportunities for cultural engagement, mentorship and networks of support in their overall education journey.

Secondary analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children

Aurora and our ANU partners undertook exploratory analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) to identify what existing data revealed about which outcomes matter in Indigenous education. This included factor analysis to identify which LSIC Wave 12 variables explain the most survey variation, which revealed a list of approximately 60 variables. Network analysis revealed a high degree of connectivity across these variables. Whether a student was ‘happy to go to school’ was the most connected variable, suggesting that a students’ feelings about school are influenced by and impact upon many other factors. A students’ knowledge about their culture was also highly connected. Network analysis also revealed a high degree of clustering of SEWB variables (30 variables in cluster). Mediation analysis was used to identify the relationship between academic, SEWB and cultural outcomes and revealed substantial circularity across these domains. These findings suggest that the development of the new NSRA should recognise the deeply interconnected web between education outcomes and the wider social, cultural and spiritual life of Indigenous students.

Additional comments on the new National School Reform Agreement

Data sharing and Indigenous Data Governance

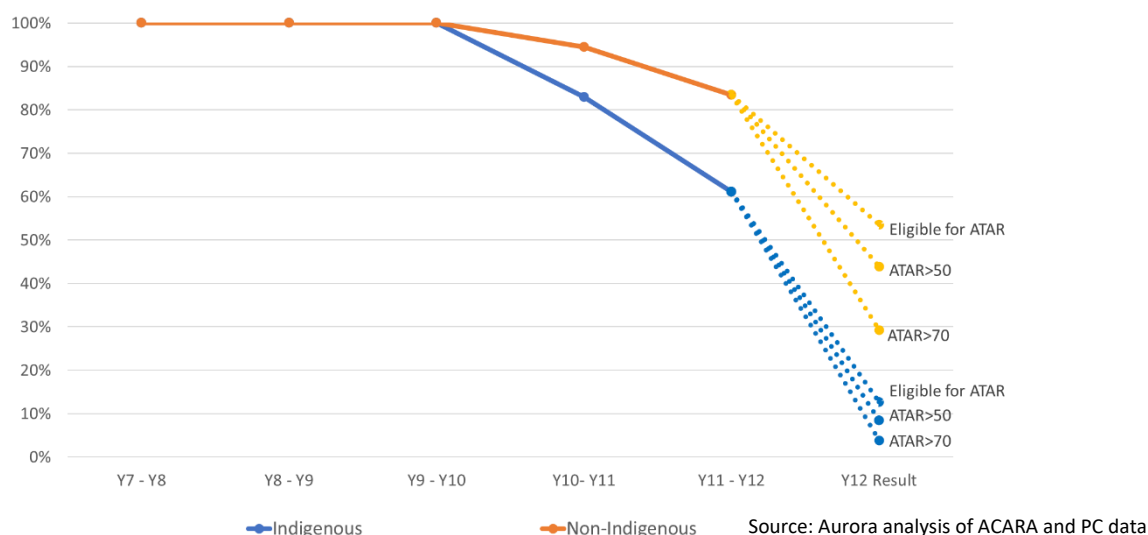
Aurora has encountered significant challenges in accessing data for our students, including student-level NAPLAN scores, attendance rates, Year 12 completion and ATAR eligibility. While Aurora has data sharing agreements in place with families and partner schools, collecting this data is resource intensive for both Aurora and partner schools and data requests can sometimes present challenges for nominated school staff. Access to this data is critical in enabling Aurora to respond to the needs of our students, identify risk early and evaluate and improve our programs. The new NSRA presents an opportunity to implement Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4 in education by supporting Indigenous organisations to access and utilise Indigenous education data to support program delivery and community development initiatives.

Aurora notes that the new NSRA should also commit state and federal governments to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance principles in the management of Indigenous education data. The adoption of Indigenous Data Governance in Aurora’s RISE Project provides a real-world example of how legal and contractual rights and obligations – including rights and obligations set out under the Privacy Act – can be balanced with principles of Indigenous self-governance and ownership of data.

Formal and informal streaming processes in high school

Through the delivery of the HSP in NSW and WA, Aurora has observed the use of formal and informal streaming processes which adversely and disproportionately impact Indigenous educational journeys and careers. This includes the Online Literacy and Numeracy Test in WA and the HSC Minimum Standard test in NSW which both determine ATAR eligibility based on academic testing. The experience of many alumni of our Scholarship Program and International Study Tour suggests that Indigenous academic talent is often not recognised or supported in high school and that many Indigenous students only begin to thrive academically once they reach higher education. Aurora is concerned that formal and informal streaming processes are unduly limiting the academic careers of many Indigenous students and should be investigated and addressed as part of the new NSRA.

Aurora analysis of high school apparent retention rates and Year 12 outcomes by Indigenous status



Conclusion

The new NSRA provides a welcome opportunity to create education reform which benefits Indigenous students. We strongly encourage the Commission to engage directly with Aurora and to apply the insights and experience we have accrued in delivering the RISE Project and the High School Program in the development of Final Report and the new NSRA.

To discuss this submission further, please contact Jarrod Hughes, Aurora’s Monitoring and Evaluation Manager,