# Universities Australia Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on the Education Evidence Base

October 2016

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's draft report on the education evidence base. Universities are at the forefront of Australia's effort to build an education evidence base and affirm Australia's position as a highly innovative and educated nation.

The recent OECD Education at a Glance 2016 publication confirms that Australia performs well by international standards, but more can be done to ensure Australia has a world-leading teaching and learning system. While we acknowledge the excellent work by many in the sector, research can be better leveraged and our education system can be improved.

UA members provided detailed submissions to the Commission's Inquiry addressing the data and evidence gaps. This submission focuses on the Commission's proposed national education research framework and governance arrangements, the introduction of a unique student identifier, and reforms to improve access to education data. UA also draws the Commission's attention to the linkages between the issues clearly identified in the draft report and the broader research system issues.

UA recommends that:

- governments consult extensively with the university sector on the national education research framework including governance arrangements and research priorities;
- governments implement a nationally consistent unique student identifier;
- the Productivity Commission considers legislative and regulatory reforms that support greater access to and use of education data for research purposes; and
- the Productivity Commission consider broader research system issues and the fundamentals of the research system in considering the education evidence base.

## National education research framework

UA welcomes the prospect of a new education research framework that could provide a more holistic and cohesive approach to address gaps and weaknesses in the education research system. Sustained national leadership and a program of continuous improvement is needed to deliver the best evidence-based education system. However, this must not come at the expense of other areas of the research system.

The research system is already under considerable strain. The inadequate support for the indirect costs of research has consistently been recognised as a serious weakness of the Australian research system. The indirect costs of research are real, substantial and ongoing. They include a range of engagement and

outreach activities that are fundamental to the success of university research delivering improved education outcomes. The benefits of new research priorities and governance arrangements in education research will not be fully realised if there is no recognition of the additional costs arising from this work.

Safeguarding a broad base of research and innovation capability ensures we can address our unique national challenges. Building capacity and capability for a world-class, evidence-driven education system requires long-term, strategic investment and resourcing in areas and disciplines that will deliver the most impact.

The proposal for an independent body responsible for 'bottom-up' evaluative research represents a significant change to the research system and its implementation will require careful consideration to maximise the benefits for all Australians. Australia's education system would benefit from a concerted effort to create research-intensive environments, at scale, that are capable of harnessing expertise across the domains of research, policy and practice. However, consultation will be necessary to ensure that development of an independent body and national framework for education research achieves the objectives outlined by the Commission.

What is meant by high-quality education research must not be restricted to randomised trials. UA's members have raised questions about the effectiveness of this as a standard for education research, given its adoption in the US and UK has had mixed results. It is essential that Australia maintains its capacity for new, emerging and innovative research approaches and keeps pace with international research developments in education. UA has strong reservations about reducing funding for types of education research currently funded through the Australian Research Council (ARC).

Care should be taken that existing linkages, infrastructure, expertise and support systems from the broader research system are drawn on. In particular, we strongly support the Commission's recommendation that education research decisions are supported through a transparent, rigorous and peer-reviewed process. Substantial peer review and grant management capabilities already exist within the ARC. Where possible, the capabilities of existing organisations and governments should be leveraged.

UA supports the Commission's focus on translating research into policy and practice. This is an important area that has not received enough focus in Australia. Leadership and support from all levels of government can assist in galvanising policy departments and education providers to become active partners in research. Education providers have a key role in identifying critical research questions and gaps in the evidence base, and in facilitating the translation of research. In other countries, and in other areas of research in Australia, there is a dedicated funding stream for the translation of research into policies and practice. Education research would benefit from the same support. It is essential that our efforts to build high-quality evidence is supplemented with a focus on developing a skilled workforce and ensuring that appropriate infrastructure is in place to support the use of research.

## Unique student identifier

UA strongly supports the introduction of a national unique student identifier (USI). A nationally consistent USI approach would allow researchers, governments and education providers to more readily share data and information across the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors.

The Australian economy will require 2.1 million more university graduates by 2025 than were needed in 2015, and an additional 1.7 million skilled workers to replace those exiting the workforce as the population ages.[1] Building such a well-educated and digitally literate workforce will require a pipeline of students aiming and prepared for higher education, including targeted efforts to lift the level of participation in higher education by underrepresented groups.

Universities' community outreach and engagement programs aim to build awareness of and aspirations for further education opportunities within underrepresented groups. Such programs commonly focus on schools and school-aged children and are critical to achieving long-term, sustainable improvement in participation rates. However, the impact of these programs is often difficult to assess since the students involved can take any number of future paths and thus can become easily 'lost' by the university undertaking the program.

A USI that would enable improved tracking of students would allow universities and governments to better evaluate outreach programs—which typically feature long time frames between first engagement and graduation—and provide more targeted interventions across the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors. More generally, the USI will enable the development of a comprehensive picture of student movement between jurisdictions and between schools, universities and VET providers, all of which will greatly assist policy development and efficient allocation of support funding.

A USI that covers children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) would provide a more comprehensive record and greater efficiency, noting the Commission's concerns about the costs of extending a USI approach to ECEC. A simplified and streamlined approach to student identification would reduce the complexities and costs of collecting and retaining data over time, and the cost of developing a USI may be offset by future efficiency and productivity gains.

## Access to education data

UA supports the Commission's recommendations for legal and regulatory reform to better harness the value of our national education data. Our capacity to better use our data depends on our ability to simplify access for researchers. Australia is a world leader in developing innovative methods to link and integrate data in the research sector. Current privacy and confidentiality arrangements for public sector data have not kept pace with maturing tools and techniques to manage confidentiality. There are new ways to transform data to protect people's privacy and still make pertinent information available for use.

Differing requirements for access to data between government agencies can add another layer of complexity when research spans across areas. There would be numerous benefits in harmonising privacy and security legislation across jurisdictions and agencies, and in developing governance arrangements and systems that would facilitate linking data from different areas including uniform recognition of ethics approvals. Teacher workforce data, for example, is needed to assist decision-makers in universities, schools, communities and government plan for teacher training and identify specialisations in demand. Variability of state and territory data collection limits our capacity to undertake both short and long-term national workforce planning.

[1] Deloitte Access Economics 2015, The importance of universities to Australia's prosperity, Deloitte Access Economics Pty Ltd, Canberra.

This is a critical issue for all sectors and is currently being considered in detail by the Commission's Inquiry into Data Availability and Use. UA's submission to the inquiry outlines a number of critical elements that are needed to support data linking and optimise the use of data for research and policy-making for the education sector and more broadly.

## Broader research system issues

The policy settings and framework for education research must not be considered in isolation from the broader research system. A strong national education evidence base relies on having a high-performing research system more generally. There are clear benefits in taking a whole-of-system approach to cross-sectoral issues such as research training and data infrastructure. It is crucial that any changes to the education research framework is placed in the broader context of the research ecosystem, and leverages the significant work being done across a range of reviews and reports.

### Review of Australia's research training system

The recent review of Australia's research training system by the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) is highly relevant to the Commission's recommendation to build Australia's education researcher capacity. Researchers across all disciplines must be equipped with the skills for data analysis, procedures and methods in an increasingly data-driven research environment.

Our current research training system could do more to develop education researchers with high-level data skills, particularly in relation to undertaking data analysis within policy-intense settings, using emerging item and scaling techniques, applying growth modelling techniques and in using data management tools. There is scope to consider both training in education-specific technical skills and general digital literacy as part of the Government's and sector's response to the ACOLA review.

Increasing the number of employees with research and data skills in policy-making agencies and education providers is critical if we are to develop an evidence-based and data-oriented education system. The recruitment of skilled research graduates is one of the most important mechanisms used by industry to access the benefits of research.

Unlike most countries, the majority of Australian researchers are employed in the higher education sector. It is of vital importance that our research system provides the flexible learning options and skills needed to ensure graduates can succeed both in and out of academia. The recently announced changes to the funding for research training could reduce barriers for potential students already working in government or industry to complete a PhD part-time and improve their data and analytical skills. UA welcomes the Government's commitment of $28.2 million to expand the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute PhD internship program. It is essential that the program supports closer linkages between researchers, policy makers and education providers as well as commercial businesses and STEM disciplines.

### National Research Infrastructure Roadmap

The 2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap currently underway provides a timely opportunity to ensure Australia has the necessary infrastructure and services needed to provide access, link and analyse data, and promote stronger linkages between researchers, policy-makers and providers. Investing in collaborative, national research infrastructure that has purchase beyond any one sector is a more

pragmatic and effective solution than the Commission's proposed online metadata repository for education datasets modelled on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's METeOR.

The principles underpinning the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Scheme (NCRIS) and the Roadmap, as detailed in UA's submission, should be considered further by the Commission as a basis for recommendations regarding education research infrastructure. Major national infrastructure should serve a broad user base, independent of institutional or disciplinary groups. This approach maximises the impact of every dollar invested and enables yet unimagined connections to be drawn across datasets, platforms and sectors. Education providers, businesses, industry often face an additional barrier of visibility of research infrastructure. The experience of NCRIS facilities in encouraging genuine access to the broader knowledge system should be leveraged wherever possible.