

Productivity Commission

Economic Impact of an Ageing Australia

Submission of

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An ageing Australia is one in which, by definition, there are fewer young Australians: the projected figures of reduced workforce growth are not disputed. The economic impact of a scarce resource is that each of its units becomes more valuable. And therefore needs to be cared for more scrupulously

Productivity in education is notoriously hard to measure. But it is a sad commentary, indicative of somewhat reactionary teachers' unions who eschew performance measurement at every turn, that there is so little (i.e., probably no) attention given to schools' internal management tools to store and compare student attainment for internal use by senior management. A more charitable explanation might be that the average person on the academic side of managing schools has no exposure to modern database tools.

How can any institution claim to be productive at any level if it does not have internal reporting systems?

Imagine an airliner in which all the cables to the instrument panel are cut: the data is still gathered in engines and at control surfaces but none of it shows on the instruments.

Imagine a cricket match in which every spectator keeps their own scorecard because there was no scoreboard. Welcome to education in 2004! What business employing upwards of 100 tertiary trained employees can expect to function with almost

non-existent management reporting. And with no one remarking on its absence?

The Federal Education Minister is demanding schools provide plain English reporting to parents. But is anything being said about storing information about student attainment in a form in which it can be compared across subjects and during students' academic career? Currently, the data is gathered, kept at the teacher level in most cases, compiled to a semester report to parents and filed. Rarely to be consulted again.

More timely pooling of student assessment results would help focus attention on issues such as----

- a) what exactly are students being taught and to what end;
- b) how valid or consistent are the teaching and assessment practices - both assessment design and marking policies; and
- c) based on the pooled feedback from several teachers---
 - (i) in which aspect of learning (not necessarily in which "subject") is each student excelling or lagging; and
 - ii) should a student's future learning be directed differently to maximise their personal fulfilment and likely contribution to society?

I find that if I discuss these topics with database professionals, they assume all this is being done in schools already. If I discuss it in academic circles, it's all too radical a concept for them to come to terms with.

Given the shortage of new entrants to the work force in the coming years, can we afford not to maximise every single current student's potential?