



24 October 2012

Teaching and learning – maximising our investment in Australian schools

Deakin University welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into *Teaching and learning – maximising our investment in Australian schools*. The University has great interest in the quality of the Australian schooling system as a provider of higher education, including of pre-service teachers, an employer and engaged community partner.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians outlines two central goals of Australian policy for schooling by 2018:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence.

Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens.

Deakin University strongly endorses these goals and works in partnership with school communities in the Barwon South-West region, the Western corridor and South-East Melbourne to support their achievement.

The Senate Inquiry into Teaching and learning is concerned with questions also addressed in the final report of the Gonski *Review of Funding for Schooling* published in December 2011 and the *Held back* report on the experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools released by the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission in September 2012. This submission draws on both reports as well as research conducted by the OECD and academics in Australia and internationally to support our comments.

Commitment to equity in education

Deakin University has a strong and enduring commitment to access, equity and widening participation to higher education. The University endorses the findings of the Gonski review, in particular its focus on equity in educational opportunities and commitment to improving the educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and young people in Australia through a nationally consistent, needs-based funding model.

Universities can assist the Australian and State Governments, the education sector and individual school communities to create a high-quality schooling system by:

- Continually improving education programs for pre-service and current teachers

- Nurturing aspirations and high expectations in students and promoting lifelong learning and pathways to further education

Universities have a defined but critical role to play in supporting the achievement of the goals outlined in the Melbourne declaration as education providers and community partners which is explored in the following.

The role of universities in improving equity in educational outcomes

Deakin University has a longstanding commitment to Indigenous students, students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, and as articulated in its compact agreement with the Australian Government to students with disability and students in rural and regional areas. Through the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP), the University funds a comprehensive support program targeting prospective and current students from low SES backgrounds to improve access to and retention in higher education. The University actively supports over 1,000 students with disability and has an important role as a higher education provider in the regional centres of Geelong and Warrnambool as well as through its Deakin at Your Doorstep program which is delivered in collaboration with TAFE partners in five regional locations across Victoria.

Teaching for the 21st century

Deakin University supports pedagogies which prepare secondary school students for their post-school life, including higher education. Digital literacy, highly developed literacy and numeracy skills as well as problem solving, creative and critical thinking and collaboration are essential skills for a successful life in the 21st century. The University shares the view that schools should embrace innovation and champion the development of 21st century skills articulated in the Gonski review. New technologies in particular could be used to address some of the more unique challenges Australia faces, such as providing high-quality education to students in very remote parts of the country and to support the professional development of teachers (Review of Funding for Schooling – Final Report, 2011, p.220).

Good teaching matters

The Gonski review and research by the OECD, the Productivity Commission and education researchers suggest that:

- the quality of teaching matters,
- high-quality teachers develop personalised practices which are flexible and cater to the variety of learning needs,
- modules on inclusive pedagogies should be incorporated into all teacher training courses,
- direct and student-oriented instruction methods are most effective for teaching disadvantaged students, and
- pre-service teachers should be given more opportunities to experience disadvantaged schools.

As an education provider with a sizable teacher training program at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, Deakin University is continually developing and innovating its course offerings and design.

Building capacity in pre-service teachers to increase equity in schooling

The Productivity Commission (2011) identifies a number of opportunities to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the teaching workforce, including improved pre-service teacher placement and induction through innovative university–school partnerships and supportive learning experiences in school classrooms. The University actively creates paid and volunteer opportunities for current Deakin students to work with students in disadvantaged schools, largely funded through the HEPPP. This includes pre-service teachers who often engage in more complex activities, such as mentoring of secondary school students and co-curricular activities delivered in collaboration with partner schools. The feedback from high school and university students, teachers and principals is excellent with the pre-service teachers participating in these opportunities being considered as ideal candidates for graduate teacher positions.

A valued profession

International research presented in the Gonski review and elsewhere shows that high-achieving and high-equity schooling systems typically invest in building quality and capability in school leaders and teachers, promote continuous improvement and innovation in the schooling system and have strategic and systematic approaches in place to attract, develop, and retain the most talented teachers. The impact of quality teachers on student engagement and performance is significant and teaching must become a valued and respected occupation in the Australian community.

Universities as engaged community partners

Deakin University has been enabled by the HEPPP to develop strong school-university partnerships with some of Victoria’s most disadvantaged schools and deliver intensive outreach programs, including its innovative Access Express program, which aim to raise students’ aspiration and attainment levels. Our experience shows that targeted, long-term interventions and coordination of activities between schools, universities and community partners have the potential to influence school cultures and increase educational aspirations and opportunities for individual students. It is only through dedicated funds, such as the HEPPP, that intensive outreach work is possible and can be sustained as a mutually beneficial partnership.

Essential leadership

Strong leadership from principals, the school executive and the broader school community is critical to drive school improvement, especially in those schools where the learning needs of students are most acute (Review of Funding of Schooling – Final Report, 2011). Effective leadership can instil a school culture that embraces social inclusion, diversity and high expectations. It may in turn prevent teachers from lowering their expectations for the academic achievement of their students, a demoralising outcome that we observe on occasions in schools with concentrated disadvantage.

Parents as learning partners

The Gonski review makes a number of poignant observations about the importance and positive impact of parental engagement on the learning of children and young people. The authors conceptualise parents as learning partners in their child’s education from the earliest age and advocate parents’ contributions to the school’s culture and operations in a whole-of-school approach as well as proactive communication with parents, including via technology-enabled channels.

Our concern is for parents of children in underperforming schools and as a result we are working with partners on building the school's capacity to engage with parents to improve student outcomes and aspirations for higher education. Drawing on research by the Nous Group (2011), the Gonski report demonstrates that parents from low SES backgrounds can find it more difficult to become learning partners for their children due to lower levels of self-efficacy caused by their own level of education or negative experiences of school as well as language skills, confidence and pressures from other aspects of life. Our work with partner schools illustrates that these challenges can be overcome, at least partially, by parental engagement during the primary years of schooling in ways that are sensitive to the needs and demographics of the school community and build on parents' aspirations for their children.

We trust this feedback is useful and we look forward to receiving your report in due course.

Yours sincerely

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