Consultation report

In June 2020, Education Council agreed to establish a national evidence institute "to position Australia's educators at the forefront of education research". An inaugural Director was appointed and commenced a series of consultations regarding the future operations of the organisation.

The consultations described in this report took place between July and September and included Australian Government and state and territory government Ministers with responsibility for education and early childhood education and care, heads of state and territory education departments, representatives of the Catholic education system and of independent schools, principal associations, teacher unions, early childhood and care organisations, parent groups, universities, researchers and think tanks. The organisation continues to consult a wide range of interested people and organisations.

While consultations were open and participants could raise any issues they wished, the following broad questions were used as a guide:

- What would success look like for the organisation?
- What gaps in the current evidence base should be priorities for the organisation to address?
- What existing research work or researchers should the organisation be aware of?
- How can the organisation best engage educators?

A list of stakeholders consulted is at Appendix A.

Throughout September, the organisation also conducted a series of focus groups with early childhood educators and care centre leaders, school teachers and school leaders, from each jurisdiction, sector and from remote, rural, regional and metropolitan settings. The focus groups collected detailed, first-hand information regarding the issues upon which participants seek research evidence and the manner in which they typically access resources to inform their work. The report from the focus groups is a companion document to this report of the consultations with other stakeholders, and both will shape the organisation's work into the future.

The organisation is grateful to all who participated in the consultations for generously sharing their time and views.

Consultation findings

On the organisation's establishment

Stakeholders believe that the establishment of the organisation is timely and has significant potential to contribute to improvements in learning. There is particular satisfaction at the inclusion of early childhood education and care in the organisation's remit, as a possible conduit for greater understanding and cooperation between the early childhood and schooling sectors, that could lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

On the organisation's objectives

There was broad agreement that the primary objectives of the organisation are to enhance the **accessibility of high-quality evidence** to the Australian education community on issues that affect children and young people's development and learning and to support **effective use of evidence in practice**. Stakeholders imagine that this will be accomplished both by curating and translating existing research and by conducting or commissioning original research. Stakeholders expressed their hope that the organisation would become an authoritative, respected and frequently referenced resource for educators and policy-makers.

Stakeholders would like to see the organisation's efforts generate tangible **change in practice**, with both educators and policy-makers incorporating appropriate and proven strategies into their work.

Some stakeholders further expressed hope for a **change in culture** around evidence, with more educators and policy-makers reflexively demanding research evidence when faced with decisions, as well as adopting an evaluative mindset towards their own strategies, regularly assessing and adjusting their work based on planned and scientifically valid observations.

Some stakeholders expect the result of this work to be **greater confidence** among actors in the education system: confidence in choosing strategies, confidence in maintaining course with strategies even if there are implementation setbacks, and confidence in exercising their own professional voice in public debates about education, often dominated by non-educators.

> ## "Give us the confidence and competence to be discerning users of research."
>
> **— Principal**

Looking at the system level, stakeholders expressed hope that a clearer evidence base could assist Australia in formulating a **more stable, long-term direction for education,** with less susceptibility to abrupt changes in policy due to leadership transitions, political processes and "transient enthusiasms". Regarding the latter, the tendency to grasp at programs and interventions based on weak or context-dependent evidence was of concern to many stakeholders; one expressed a desire for the organisation to "help protect us from the grifters and the fads".

> ## "Success would be people consolidating on the same direction for change."
>
> **— Leader of peak organisation**

Similarly, many expressed hope that a clearer evidence base would lead to **greater coherence** between the materials, programs and policies generated by the many actors in the sector. Rather than the organisation be an additional source of advice for educators, it is hoped it will be a catalyst for existing sources to become better aligned with one another, reducing confusion and overburden for educators.

Finally, some stakeholders believe the organisation could play a role in the **further strengthening of the Australian education research sector**. There is a view that the work done by education researchers could be more visible, both to other researchers and to actors within the education system, to enhance opportunities for collaboration. Interestingly, this view was shared by principals, system leaders and representatives of the research community, indicating a desire on all sides for greater connection. Some stakeholders suggested that the organisation establish a hub for the education research sector, allowing users to identify possible connections between related projects, as well as publishing the demands for research evidence that the organisation receives from educators and policy-makers, such that other researchers could contribute to resolving them.

On the organisation's operating principles

Stakeholders expect the organisation to maintain the highest standards of **rigour and integrity**. This applies to both how the organisation conducts and translates research, with best practice methodological and ethical protocols, and how the organisation frames its conclusions, taking clear positions where warranted by the evidence, even when controversial, rather than seeking agreement based on what might be most palatable to actors in the system.

> ## "Don't be timid. Take a position on things."
>
> **— Head of state education department**

To achieve this, stakeholders underscored the importance of the organisation's **independence**, particularly from ideological or political pressures. They expressed hope that the organisation's work would result in evidence leading policy decisions, rather than being sought retrospectively to support decisions already made. Ministers themselves were among those who most strongly voiced their desire that the organisation and its Board act at arms' length from political imperatives and electoral cycles.

At the same time, the organisation will need to prove its **responsiveness** to demand from the education community. Educators, leaders, policy-makers and peak organisations all expect to have a voice in setting the organisation's research agenda. In this sense, the organisation must develop ongoing processes to ensure its prioritisation of topics is informed by and relevant to the challenges confronted by its different audiences.

Stakeholders want the organisation to adopt a **collaborative approach**. It should complement rather than duplicate or crowd out other researchers and research organisations. It should see early childhood education and care services, schools and systems as partners in evidence generation and implementation, rather than simply consumers of research, and work with them as widely as possible within the constraints of its resources and position in the national education architecture.

Given the diversity of Australian education, many stakeholders noted the organisation will need to exercise considerable **sensitivity to context**. The organisation should recognise that what works best in one context may not work well in another, with implications for how the organisation interprets research evidence and frames its recommendations. It also means that the organisation must remain attentive to the many contexts in which Australian educators operate across the country, in all jurisdictions, sectors, in rural and remote settings as well regional and metropolitan centres, and with culturally and socioeconomically diverse and differently-abled children and young people.

Finally, some stakeholders noted that the organisation could contribute to a **positive narrative** about Australian educators and education, by focusing on solutions rather than problems and by showcasing excellence and improvement. They observed that using evidence is a professional undertaking and as such, the work of the organisation can increase community esteem for the profession, as well as the confidence of educators themselves.

> "Regular translation of evidence for health practitioners enhances their sense of professionalism. The institute can do the same for teachers."
>
> — Education Minister

On the organisation's research

Stakeholders expressed a desire that the organisation's research agenda represent not a collection of disconnected topics, but a cohesive vision for education and education research.

Many **areas of demand for research evidence** were identified. The most frequently raised were:

- Implementation science: current practice in early childhood and care settings and schools; barriers to evidence use; mechanisms to foster evidence-led change in schools

- The COVID-19 pandemic: impact; lessons learned; recommendations for recovery

- Measurement and data in early childhood education and care: using information about children's development in planning activities; empirical evidence about the characteristics of effective programs

- Transitions: processes to support well-being and continuity of development and learning between early childhood and care settings, primary and secondary schooling and post-school pathways

- Equity: overcoming educational disadvantage for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and young people, those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disability and those in rural and remote settings

- Learning framework and curriculum implementation: translation of high-quality evidence on development of the five learning outcomes into practical resources for early childhood practitioners; teaching of literacy, numeracy and the general capabilities, particularly creative and critical thinking; characteristics of effective curriculum resources

- Educator and teacher competencies, particularly those associated with Professional Standard 4, such as managing behaviour and supporting engagement, well-being and mental health

- Educator and teacher development: characteristics of effective initial education courses, induction and professional learning

- School leadership: school improvement strategies; community engagement

- Program evaluation: evaluation of specific programs that are widely used or show promise; description of the common principles of effective programs.

Many stakeholders suggested the organisation develop and publish **standards of evidence**. Such standards would guarantee consistent, transparent decisions regarding design and interpretation of the organisation's own research, as well as its interpretation of others' research. The standards could

also assist educators and policy-makers to plan and make valid observations in their own early childhood and school settings, and in evaluating evidence claims made by others.

> ### "Create standards of *evidences,* plural, which help to promote a culture of measurement for improvement at the classroom and school level as well."
>
> — **Education researcher**

Stakeholders also noted the need for clear **ethics guidelines and research protocols**, particularly related to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and communities.

Relatively few stakeholders commented on **research methodology**. Some underscored the importance of randomised control trials, others of longitudinal studies and others the potential for useful insights from effective analysis of existing or potential data sets. Some, particularly school and system leaders, mentioned the importance of including cost-benefit analyses when evaluating or comparing possible interventions.

On the organisation's products

Stakeholders noted that educators are time-poor, already have extensive information available to them and, particularly in school settings, are often suffering change-fatigue. To reach them, **effective materials** must be short and sharp, use accessible language and be available in a variety of engaging formats. Some suggested that materials be explicitly linked to existing documents that educators work with, such as the Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Framework, Australian Curriculum and Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals.

Stakeholders believe the organisation's materials should go beyond explaining research findings and provide **practical guidance on implementation**, clearly setting out steps or "progressions" for change. Topics covered by the organisation should result in packages of resources, such as practice guides, tools, checklists and work samples or videos of proven strategies being modelled.

> ### "Be a bridge between evidence and practice."
>
> — **Head of state education department**

There was variance among stakeholders as to whether the organisation's role should extend to **active support for implementation** in early childhood and care services and schools. Some suggested the organisation have a direct outreach function, such as an online implementation support team, its own professional learning program or even partnerships with some services and schools. Others felt this was the role of systems and peak organisations and that the organisation's role should be effectively supporting their work with services and schools.

Next steps

The views shared during the consultations are shaping the development of the organisation's strategic plan, research agenda and policies regarding its operations. These documents will be considered by the organisation's governing bodies and subsequently launched publicly.

The organisation will establish ongoing consultation mechanisms, both to inform annual decisions regarding the topics it will work on and to constantly review and improve its means of engaging with educators and policy-makers. The organisation looks forward to working in partnership with all stakeholders to maximise the value of its contribution to Australian education.

Appendix A List of consultations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group

Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia

Australian Association for Research in Education

Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate

Australian Childcare Alliance

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

Australian College of Deans of Education

Australian College of Educators

Australian Community Children's Services

Australian Council for Educational Research

Australian Council of State School Organisations

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

Australian Education Union

Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations

Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Australian Government Primary Principals Association

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

Australian Parents Council

Australian Primary Principals Association

Australian Professional Teachers Association

Australian Schools Plus

Australian Science Teachers Association

Australian Secondary Principals' Association

Australian Special Education Principals Association

The Hon Yvette Barry MLA, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Australian Capital Territory Government

Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership

Dr Jennifer Cartmel, Institute for Education Research, Griffith University

Catholic Secondary Principals Association

Catholic School Parents Association

Catholic Schools New South Wales

Centre for Independent Studies

Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Christian Schools Australia

Community Connections Solutions Australia

Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Policy Group

Early Learning and Care Council of Australia

Education Endowment Foundation (UK)

Education Services Australia

Educational Data Talks

The Hon Sue Ellery MLC, Minister for Education and Training, Western Australian Government

Family Day Care Australia

The Front Project

The Hon Andrew Gee MP, Minister for Decentralisation and Regional Education, Australian Government

Gonski Institute for Education

Goodstart Early Learning

Professor Jenny Gore, Priority Research Centre for Teachers and Teaching, University of Newcastle

Grattan Institute

Independent Education Union

Independent Schools Australia

Isolated Children's Parents' Association

Learning First

Lutheran Education Australia

Macquarie University Department of Education Studies

The Hon James Merlino MP, Minister for Education, Victorian Government

The Hon Sarah Mitchell MP, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning, New South Wales Government

Professor Julianne Moss, Research for Educational Impact, Deakin University

National Catholic Education Commission

National Foundation for Educational Research (UK)

National Outside School Hours Services Alliance

New South Wales Association of Independent Schools

New South Wales Department of Education

Northern Territory Department of Education

Orbis

Paul Ramsay Foundation

Q Project, Monash University

Queensland Department of Education

Queensland Education Leadership Institute

Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood Centre, University of Melbourne

Professor Marc de Rosnay, Early Start, University of Wollongong

Science of Learning Research Centre, University of Queensland

South Australian Department for Education

Tasmanian Department of Education

Tasmanian Professional Learning Institute

The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, Australian Government

The Tutor Network

The Hon Selena Uibo MLA, Minister for Education and Minister for Training, Northern Territory Government

Victorian Department of Education and Training

Western Australian Department of Education

Social Ventures Australia

Universities Australia

Western Australian Primary Principals' Association