

# Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on the National School Reform Agreement

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## 1. Introduction

This submission focuses on the issue of the meaning of equity in education and how progress in improving equity can be measured and monitored. It is supported by the attached paper “Leadership for Equity and Adequacy in Education” published in the *Journal School Leadership and Management*. We consider that the idea of equity is central to national school reform and is not defined clearly enough in the current framework guiding the National School reform Agreement.

Achieving equity in education has long been a key aspect of the national goals for schooling. Most recently it is one of the key goals in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019) set for Australian education and its future development. The goal of equity in education should be well-defined in order to guide education policy and funding, measure equity and monitor progress in improving equity. However, that definition is lacking at present and has never been adequately addressed in previous statements of national goals. For example, in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration equity of education is mentioned after ‘excellence’ of education that often leaves it with much less policy attention and making equity a consequence of greater excellence.

The lack of a clear definition of equity in education leads to a variety of interpretations of equity and deficient targets. This promotes lack of accountability for improving equity.

We suggest that a clear definition of equity is necessary for the Commission to meet its terms of reference which is to assess:

- the effectiveness and appropriateness of the National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) of the National Schooling Reform Agreement (NSRA)
- the appropriateness of the Measurement Framework in measuring progress towards achieving the outcomes of the NSRA.

Furthermore, adoption of a clear definition of equity in education is fundamental for the Commission to assess National Policy Initiatives against the objectives, outcomes, sub-outcomes (performance indicators) and targets set out in the NSRA.

## 2. Equity in Australia’s national school reporting framework

Equity in education is not well-defined in Australia’s national education reporting framework and there are significant deficiencies in outcomes targets and the Measurement Framework. This has to be rectified to make progress on improving equity in education.

### The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration

Goal 1 of the Alice Springs Education Declaration (<https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>) states that the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity. As mentioned above, equity is stated as secondary to (or consequence of) excellence and is not defined to give it a specific operational meaning. The only statement about equity says that Australian governments will work to support students of all backgrounds to achieve their full educational potential.

The Commitment to Action in the Declaration refers to two equity groups. It says that Australian governments Australian Governments are committed to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential and to ensuring the education community works to 'close the gap' for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also says that governments are committed to promoting equal opportunity and education outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage and that the education community must improve outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students. Furthermore, the Declaration states:

Australian Governments must provide all young Australians with equality of opportunity that enables them to reach their potential and achieve their highest educational outcomes.

However, the concept of equality of opportunity is indeterminate as it is difficult to compare education opportunities between individuals or equity groups. This difficulty has resulted in a variety of interpretations, most notably such as equal access to education, equal instruction for all students, equal resources for all students, and equal outcomes for all students, none of which provide adequate guidance to education policy development and school funding.

### **National School Reform Agreement 2018**

The National School Reform Agreement (<https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/national-school-reform-agreement>) sets out a range of national and state policy initiatives to achieve agreed objectives, outcomes and targets. The objective of the Agreement is that Australian schooling provides a high quality and equitable education for all students. The Preliminaries to the Agreement state:

Parties recognise the critical importance of supporting and facilitating the achievement of priority equity cohorts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with a disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Outcomes in part state that governments are committed to improving the academic achievement of all students, including priority equity cohorts.

The agreed national targets to achieve this outcome are:

- Australia considered to be a high quality and high equity schooling system by international standards by 2025;
- Lift the Year 12 (or equivalent) or Certificate III attainment rate to 90 per cent by 2020; and
- At least halve the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020, from the 2006 baseline.

Governments agreed to track progress against sub-outcomes. They include:

- Lower the proportion of students from priority equity cohorts in the bottom levels and increase the proportion of students in the top levels of performance (bottom two and top two bands) in NAPLAN Literacy and Numeracy, for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
- Reduce the gap in achievement between students from various socio-economic backgrounds in Australia's PISA educational performance compared to other countries and the OECD average.
- Increase the proportion of young people from priority equity cohorts, who have completed year 12 or equivalent or gained a qualification at the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate III or above.

Governments agreed that sub-outcomes would be disaggregated by cohorts where available.

However, equity in education is not defined in the NSRA. What does an equitable education for all students mean? Moreover, while several equity groups are mentioned in the Preliminaries to the Agreement, targets are set only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait students. No education targets are set for students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with a disability and students from educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **National Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2020**

The National Measurement Framework for Schooling (<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/measurement-framework-for-schooling-in-australia>) provides the basis for Australian Education Ministers to report to the community on the performance of schooling in line with Alice Springs Declaration. Its *key performance measures* (KPMs) correspond with some of the targets and sub-outcomes specified in the NSRA, but also include other indicators of school performance.

The equity focus of the Measurement Framework is slightly different to that of the NSRA. The equity groups are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, sex, language background, geographic location, socio-economic background, and disability.

Equity measures are not separately listed in the schedule of KPMs but are derived, for reporting purposes, by disaggregating the measures for participation, achievement and attainment where it is possible and appropriate to do so. Measures are disaggregated as outlined in ACARA's Data Standards Manual: Student Background Characteristics or other nationally agreed standards. However, the Manual refers to collecting data according to sex, Indigenous states, socio-economic and language background. It does not include geographic location or disability.

### **Key Performance Measures reported by ACARA**

Key performance measures for schooling in Australia are reported by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/key-performance-measures-for-schooling-in-australia>). They cover nationally agreed key performance measures (KPMs) for schooling specified in the Measurement Framework. However, it reports only on outcomes for Indigenous students and does not provide outcomes for the other equity groups mentioned in the Measurement Framework.

## **3. A proposed definition of equity in education**

We propose a dual equity objective. Equity should have regard to both the minimum levels of achievement expected for all students and the relative distribution of education outcomes between different social groups.

First, from an individual perspective, equity in education outcomes should mean that all children receive an education that enables them to fully participate in adult society in a way of their choosing. We call this an *adequate* education. Second, equity in education also means that students from different social groups should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of these outcomes. We call this *social equity*.

The first principle of equitable education is that all children receive at least a minimum level of education that gives them the capacity to function as independent adults and to participate effectively in society. It means that all children have the right to high quality education that equips them with the knowledge, understandings, and skills to create their own meaning in the world, to choose their own path in society as adults and to take an active part in shaping the development of society. This is a matter of justice for all individuals. In today's society, this requires all children to complete Year 12 or its equivalent.

In failing to ensure an adequate education for all, society incurs lost opportunities for its own advancement and human development that, in turn, is often associated with growing inequalities in societies. These include higher youth unemployment, lower earnings, lower productivity and economic growth, higher health care and crime costs, lower tax revenues and higher welfare expenditure.

It is not reasonable or realistic to expect that education policy should aim to ensure that all children achieve the same education outcomes because, as individuals, they have a range of abilities and talents which lead to different choices in schooling. However, it is reasonable to expect that these different abilities and talents are distributed similarly across different social, ethnic and gender groups in society. We should expect that female students as a group achieve similar average and range of outcomes as male students. The same expectation should apply to other social groups: Indigenous and non-Indigenous; low and high SES; rural, remote, and metropolitan. The goal should be to close the gaps in educational attainment measures between such groups.

A further issue is that broad social groups that are historically discriminated against in education comprise sub-groups where there are also large differences in achievement. For example, large achievement gaps exist between immigrant students from East Asia and those from the Middle East, Africa, and the South Pacific. There are also large differences in school results between Indigenous students in remote and urban areas.

Large disparities in education outcomes mean that the social group individuals are born into strongly affects their life opportunities. Large disparities in school outcomes according to different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence, and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

A dual goal of equity in education is eminently justifiable. It guarantees a threshold level of education for everyone and a fair or equitable distribution of the benefits of education for all social groups. It should be a key national goal of schooling. It would provide the framework for policy making and a clear measurable approach to assessing progress towards achieving equity in education.

Further details on the case for adequacy and social equity in education are provided in the attached paper.

#### **4. Inadequate reporting of equity outcomes**

The annual reports (<https://www.dese.gov.au/national-school-resourcing-board/resources/national-school-reform-agreement-2021-annual-report-progress-implementing-national-policy>) on the implementation of the NRSA and the progress reports (<https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/national-school-reform-agreement>) by state/territory governments report only to the implementation of the policy initiatives. They do not provide any data on progress towards the outcomes targeted by the Agreement. Nor do they include any data on progress on achievement by equity groups identified in the Measurement Framework.

The annual report and the state progress reports on the NRSA should included data to enable an assessment of the success of the national policy initiatives in meeting the objectives of the Agreement. In addition, the reports should provide sufficient data to assess progress in improving equity in education.

There are several data sources to draw upon in reporting on the target outcomes. For example, ACARA reports on NAPLAN results by sex, Indigenous status and location, Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE), parent education and occupation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports retention rates to Years 9, 10, 11 and 12 by sex and Indigenous background in *Schools*. The *Report on Government Services* reports Year 12 attainment rates by socio-economic status and location.

However, there are significant gaps in reporting on outcomes by equity group at the end of schooling. Year 12 outcomes are the ultimate measure of the success of schooling. Data collections need to be upgraded to adequately assess the effectiveness of policy initiatives and progress in improving equity in education.

## **5. Recommendations**

1. The NRSA should include a clear definition of equity in education in order to effectively guide education policy and funding and to measure progress in improving equity.
2. Equity in education should be defined as follows:
  - a. All children achieve a Year 12 Certificate or equivalent qualification;
  - b. Children from different social groups should achieve similar average educational outcomes and a similar range of these outcomes.
3. Upgrade data collection on equity group performance in retention and attainment results to Year 12.