ACHIEVING OUR EDUCATIONAL GOALS: A DECLARATION FOR SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

Australia's future success depends on the ability of the education system to support every child and young person to realise their full learning potential, and to thrive in a competitive and innovative economy and a socially cohesive society.

The central tenets of "equity" and "excellence" in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Melbourne Declaration), coupled with a vision of students becoming "successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens", are more crucial than ever (MCEETYA, 2008, p.8).

Australia is facing unprecedented social, economic and environmental challenges, driven by accelerating globalisation and technological advancements (OECD, 2018). For Australia to continue to maintain a prosperous society, and adapt and contribute to a changing world, our children and young people must be equipped with the right knowledge, skills and capabilities. If we continue on our current education trajectory, there is a risk that young people in Australia will not be adequately prepared for the future – and too many learners will miss out on the educational opportunities that they need.

Research by the Mitchell Institute identified that a concerning number of children and young people do not fulfil their potential and miss out on opportunities as they traverse the various stages of education (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, 2015). Australian students' academic performance on key international assessments reveal large social gaps which have not declined (Thomson, De Bortoli & Underwood, 2017). Results on national assessments show that the equity gaps between the most and least advantaged students continue to grow (Goss, Sonnemann, Chisholm & Nelson, 2016).

The vision and aspirations of the Melbourne Declaration, as important as they are, have not been realised. To date, efforts towards education system improvement have not delivered the desired results. And the opportunities offered and outcomes achieved by Australia's education system are far from fairly or evenly distributed (Lamb & Huo, 2017; O'Connell, Fox & Cole, 2016). This is not a shortcoming of the Melbourne Declaration and its vision, but rather a failure by Australia's education systems to take appropriate actions.

There is widespread agreement about the importance of education. An updated and future-focused declaration is a good starting point towards a genuine national conversation on education, what we need to focus on and how we are going to get there. We call on all governments to commit to work collectively towards the goals of the Declaration and provide young Australians rich and rewarding learning opportunities. We simply cannot afford for education to continue on the same path over the next ten years.

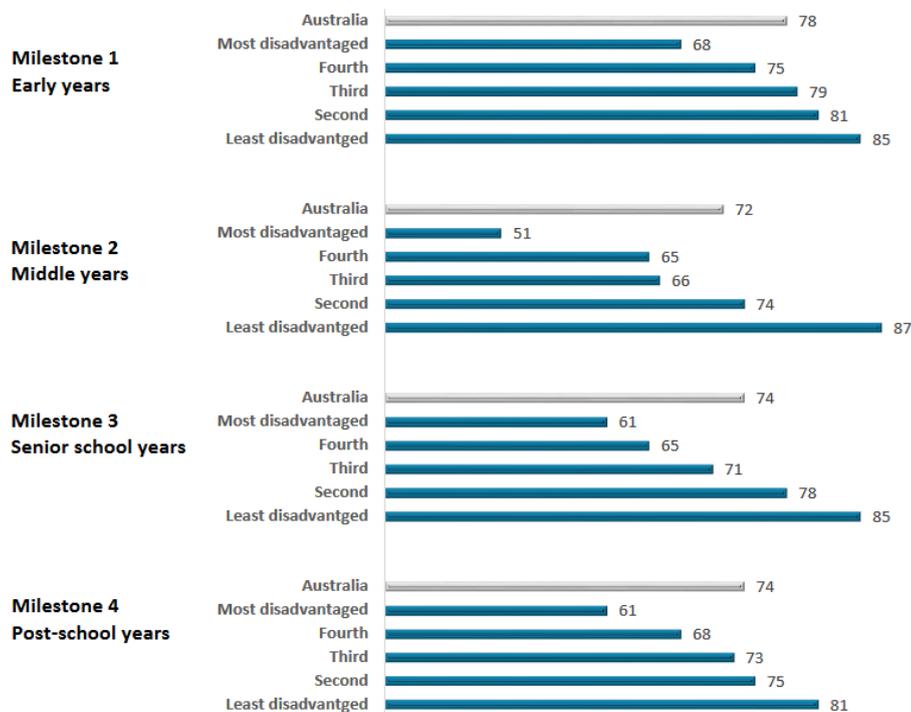# Striving to achieve the vision of the Melbourne Declaration

Education is an essential foundation for individual success and national strength. Over a lifetime, a higher level of education means higher earning, better heath, longer life and a more cohesive, trusting and inclusive society (Schleicher, 2018).

With this in mind, in 2008, education ministers across Australia agreed to the Melbourne Declaration, to set out a long-term vision for schooling where all young Australians are "provided with the opportunity to reach their full potential" (MCEETYA, 2008, p.18). After a decade of national and state policy reforms and targeted improvement strategies, the current design of the education system has not had the expected impact, and the system is not serving all learners in a way that enables them to reach their full potential.

Australia's education system is facing significant challenges. Currently, one quarter of children and young people are not adequately supported to meet key educational milestones; and one in eight of those missing out at age 24 are likely to remain disengaged for most of their working lives (Mitchell Institute, 2017). Disengagement of young people from Indigenous or low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds is even more startling. Currently, too many Australian children and young people miss out on opportunities and outcomes from early childhood through to tertiary education and employment:

- 22% of children are not developmentally on track in one or more of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains upon entry to school (approximately 69,000 children enter school developmentally vulnerable and these children are more likely to be in the bottom 20% of National Assessment Program Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores) (AEDC, 2018, 2015).

- 28% of Year 7 students do not meet achievement benchmarks in key academic skills (approximately 78,000 students are below expected achievement benchmarks in literacy and numeracy in Year 7; an estimated 62% of Indigenous students do not meet this milestone) (Lamb et al., 2015).

- 26% of students do not attain a Year 12 certificate or equivalent by age 19 (approximately 81,000 students do not attain a Year 12 or Certificate III equivalent by age 19); with significantly higher percentages for Indigenous (42%) and low SES students (39% for the lowest SES quartile) (Lamb et al., 2015).

- 27% of 24 year olds are not engaged fully in employment, education or training (approximately 93,000 young adults; with higher proportions for Indigenous and low SES people) (Lamb et al., 2015).

NAPLAN data show that there has been no significant improvement over the levels of literacy and numeracy recorded in 2008. Those who start school developmentally vulnerable are at greatest risk of being low performers as they progress through school, and they fall further behind over time (Goss et al., 2016). Enduring challenges are also evident in student engagement, with around half of Year 10 students missing more than a day of school each fortnight (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence & Zubrick, 2013).

Milestone 1 Early years

Category	Value
Australia	78
Most disadvantaged	68
Fourth	75
Third	79
Second	81
Least disadvantged	85

Milestone 2 Middle years

Category	Value
Australia	72
Most disadvantaged	51
Fourth	65
Third	66
Second	74
Least disadvantged	87

Milestone 3 Senior school years

Category	Value
Australia	74
Most disadvantaged	61
Fourth	65
Third	71
Second	78
Least disadvantged	85

Milestone 4 Post-school years

Category	Value
Australia	74
Most disadvantaged	61
Fourth	68
Third	73
Second	75
Least disadvantged	81

Previous Mitchell Institute research has highlighted the persistent effects of socio-economic disadvantage on learning opportunities for young Australians.

These gaps are clear at key milestones at all stages of education, from early childhood to the post-school years.

(Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, 2015)

Behind these data, there are also many success stories of teachers, students, families and communities striving to achieve the best possible outcomes in learning. Yet these efforts are not adequately supported by systemic conditions in which all Australian students have an equal opportunity to succeed. The national commitment to the Melbourne Declaration has not yet resulted in an education system that meets all learners' needs.

As previously advocated by the Mitchell Institute (2016), Australia needs an education system that is built around a progressive and inspiring vision of what education is for, and grounded in a clear view of the capabilities, knowledge and skills that all young people should have the opportunity to develop through their participation in education. The system needs to be driven by the belief that everyone can be a successful learner, and designed to ensure every learner can succeed to the best of their potential, to achieve meaningful outcomes that are relevant to their goals.

An effective declaration for Australian school education must also take greater account of the importance of learning in the earliest years of life, and of transitions from school into tertiary education. While the Melbourne Declaration focuses on schools, it must approach schooling as a distinct stage in the learning trajectory, *building on* the essential foundations laid in early childhood, and *building to* successful participation in tertiary education, which is increasingly vital for long-term success (Dawkins, Hurley & Noonan, 2019). In doing so, it must support continuity of learning across a broad range of outcomes, while ameliorating equity gaps and promoting excellence.

The Melbourne Declaration must have greater impact on system improvement. Any national declaration on educational goals has to be a catalyst for a shared national vision of an education system that is adaptive and equips all children and young people for success in all aspects of their lives. Rather than aiming to "refresh" and "update" the Melbourne Declaration, as is stated in the aims of the current review, we must strengthen its ability to "influence actions" (MCEETYA, 2008). Without meaningful traction with schools, principals, teachers, students, parents and the wider community, Australia will continue on the same path of rising inequality, uneven standards of excellence, and unfulfilled student potential.

What we want the education system to achieve: a broad-based view of learning

The Melbourne Declaration challenges Australians to ask ourselves what knowledge, skills, values and attitudes today's students' need, to thrive in and shape tomorrow's world.

With the proliferation of national and international testing over the last two decades, coupled with the development of league tables and growing competition among schools and sectors, the focus on educational improvement strategies has intensified. This has created pressure to improve narrowly defined learning outcomes at the expense of what should truly guide our education system – the learning needs and aspirations of our students (Bentley & Cazaly, 2015).

"Students must understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens" (Robinson, 2016).

Literacy and numeracy provide essential foundations for learning, and the goals we set in education through the Declaration should build on them. Students who do not develop robust literacy and numeracy in primary school find themselves disadvantaged in secondary school and later in life. Development of these core skills must remain foundational to our expectations of what Australian schools will deliver for all learners.

A broader base of skills and capabilities is just as important for a rapidly-changing world. The Melbourne Declaration and Australian Curriculum already recognise the importance of skills such as critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, and intercultural and ethical understanding. New forces of change increase the urgency of developing these skills, such as the growth of digital and advanced technologies; changing employment types and locations; the rise of uncertainty, ambiguity and skills instability; fiscal and social pressures; and demographic changes (World Economic Forum, 2018). These will require young people to become resilient and resourceful; to develop curiosity and self-regulation; to become engaged and problem solvers; and to develop entrepreneurial skills (see Lucas, 2018 for a discussion on global approaches to capabilities). As the OECD (2018) points out, "future-ready students need to exercise agency, in their own education and throughout life".

The education system must treat these capabilities with the same importance as the foundational skills. Domain-specific knowledge and skills and general capabilities are mutually reinforcing, so this is a matter of complementary – not competing – priorities. International research has identified strong links between capabilities and young people's education outcomes (Gabrieli, Ansel & Bartolino Krachman, 2015), including[1]:

- Capabilities may be more effective than traditional cognitive measures in predicting educational attainment and life outcomes – with growing evidence that capabilities or 'non-cognitive' measures may have equal or greater predictive power than

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[1] See Mitchell Institute's submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base, 2016 for a detailed summary: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Mitchell-Institute-Submission-to-Review-to-Achieve-Educational-Excellence-in-Australian-Schools.pdf

traditional 'cognitive' measures. For example, conscientiousness rivals IQ in predicting educational attainment, job performance, health and college grades (Heckman & Kautz, 2014; Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman & Kautz, 2011).

- Capabilities and cognitive ability are interrelated and interdependent – they are mutually reinforcing and young people's ability to apply and make meaning out of knowledge is mediated through their broader capabilities (Gutman & Schoon, 2013).

- Capabilities can be developed over the life course – with evidence indicating that capabilities are malleable over time, particularly during the adolescent or school years (Almlund et al., 2011; Heckman & Kautz, 2013).

- Capabilities are influenced by socio-economic status and may contribute to reducing the achievement gap – with schooling playing an important role in supporting and developing the 'character skills' that help young people succeed, including for adolescents who have experienced deficits in the early years (Heckman & Kautz, 2013).

While there is strong evidence regarding the importance of these capabilities, and many schools are pursuing innovative strategies to develop them, they are not yet being actively supported in all classrooms throughout Australia. The challenge remains to create the conditions for acquisition of these capabilities by all students, across diverse schools and classrooms (Lamb, Maire & Doecke, 2017).

Goals for schooling must also consider and complement the goals of other stages of learning. We know that knowledge, skills and capabilities are developed from the early years. Australian early childhood services aspire to develop the whole child, through the holistic learning and development outcomes set out in the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Commonwealth DET, 2009). Similarly, the Australian tertiary education sector aims to develop a new and broad range of skills, as evidenced through the current review of the Australian Qualifications Framework. These key documents broadly set out a vision for education and, as such, should be complementary and inform one another and any declaration on schooling.

The test for our school system will be whether we can find a balance and promote the development of cognitive skills (through literacy and numeracy) and other competencies and skills in ways that are integrated, workable and available to all students (Bentley & Cazaly, 2015). Elements of the core skills and capabilities are already captured in the Melbourne Declaration and associated policy instruments. However, there has been a lack of appropriate action to achieve these and the overall vision.

There is much to be gained from a national conversation about how a broad range of skills can be continuously and seamlessly supported, from the earliest years of learning, through school, and beyond. This will create opportunities for the school sector to draw on reform directions in other education sectors, including the EYLF and current review of the Australian Qualifications Framework. It will enable the Melbourne Declaration to be strengthened, to better articulate how the goals can be managed and actioned in relation to one another, and to balance the development of core skills and key competencies.

How the education system will achieve this: Priority areas for action

Achieving learning outcomes requires a balance between educational innovation and tried-and-tested approaches.

While proven methods provide the bedrock for system stability, innovation is a core driver for responsiveness to emerging needs. High performing jurisdictions across the world keep improving by encouraging innovation in schools (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010). There are many innovative practices emerging in Australian schools to deliver the learning that students need for the future, which can point the way to how a national declaration might help scale up innovation across the system.

The Mitchell Institute's 'Paradigm Shifters' report points to evidence of "entrepreneurial learning" as an effective and innovative way to enhance student capabilities to apply knowledge in sophisticated ways, deepen student engagement, and cultivate mindsets for success. This is best achieved through networked learning and through collaboration between teachers, students, other schools, and communities (Anderson, Hinz & Matus, 2017).

Learning practices must also be grounded in proven strategies, with a growing national and international evidence base to support this. By focusing on evidence and interventions that work – privileging this evidence, learning from it, and scaling it up so others can benefit (Hattie, 2015) – education systems can ensure that knowledge generated through research and day-to-day teaching and learning practice can be shared system-wide. This is already occurring through an increasing number of knowledge-sharing initiatives, including online repositories.

While teachers may benefit from insights and ideas about best practice, their implementation in the classroom will continue to require a high degree of professional autonomy and judgement. No two classrooms are the same, and teachers need to be able to adopt and adapt the evidence into their practices. The work of teachers is central to the success of any goals and ambitions set for the education system. Since the Melbourne Declaration, a stronger national architecture has emerged in Australia to guide teaching, through the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards, providing a rigorous yet flexible framework to support quality practice. Various state and territory governments have also set out principles to guide classroom practice, such as the Victorian Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

Other parts of the Australian education system provide examples of how systematic guidance at a national level can support best practice in ways that allow for individuality and innovation. The practice principles in the Early Years Learning Framework set out the core components of quality practice for early childhood educators, while enabling considerable scope for specific practices and pedagogies to be applied at the local level. These principles are situated within the National Quality Framework, which recognises the elements of quality that must be present at the service level, to enable educators to succeed in their work. The development of practice principles, in collaboration with practitioners, is one way in which governments can move from overall system design to classroom implementation, while retaining a high level of respect for practitioner autonomy.

A declaration on the goals of schooling is most likely to be effective if it includes a 'roadmap' and guidance as to how its vision and aspirations will be realised at all levels of the system. High-performing education systems align policies and practices across the entire system, ensuring that they are coherent over a sustained period of time and are consistently implemented (Schleicher, 2018). While it is neither possible nor desirable for governments to prescribe a recipe for schooling, a revised Melbourne Declaration could delve deeper into the classroom, and the student learning experience. This can only be achieved through genuine consultation and collaboration with teachers, principals, students and families, about how its vision can be translated into practice.

Ensuring the education system works: Measuring and sharing progress

All stakeholders in the education system play a role in progressing the goals of a national declaration on schooling.

An effective declaration will include guidance on how the contribution of each stakeholder can be monitored and supported. Such guidance must reflect the broad objectives for learning, and foster collective ownership at all levels of the education system, to share responsibility for achieving these objectives.

The present suite of measures for Australian education offers some opportunities to monitor the goals of equity and excellence (such as NAPLAN and ATAR), including by international standards (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS). While these are valuable tools for monitoring performance at the system level, they provide a limited view on student learning, excluding the broader range of skills and capabilities described above. Where these tools are used as main indicators of both student learning, and school and system effectiveness, there is a risk that they will drive the priorities of school leaders, teachers and policy-makers, to the exclusion of the broader set of goals that the Declaration upholds (Mitchell Institute, 2017). This risk is not intrinsic to the measures themselves, but in how they are used for system-wide accountability (Jackson, Adams & Turner, 2017).

For the education system to succeed in delivering on a broader, more ambitious set of goals and actions for education, these must be reflected in system-wide measurement and reporting. The challenge is to establish reliable measures that can provide timely feedback to inform policy, practice and planning – at the classroom, school, community, state and national levels. Australia cannot allow these measurement processes to become high-stakes, but must keep their focus on informing better teaching and learning.

Any new measures or assessments developed must be appropriately aligned with the curriculum, and with the knowledge and skills young people require to thrive. The feedback provided by assessment must be fit-for-purpose, with the right level of detail to inform policy and pedagogical decisions. Principals, teachers and policy makers need to be able to use this information to create better learning opportunities for students, and share these learnings collaboratively across the system. This means re-thinking our current approach to system monitoring and accountability, so that assessment becomes a tool for productive discussions and collaboration within and between schools about how to meet the needs of all learners in their communities, not a source of competitive advantage.

Collaboration, sharing and exchange of practices and experiences among teachers and across schools are increasingly valued in the education sector, as they have strong positive effects on professional learning and change (Bentley & Cazaly, 2015). Collaboration among teachers is not new; however, it can be strengthened by collaborative professional inquiry around shared and trusted information. Teachers may embrace and harness collaboration if better, holistic and timely measures of student learning exist, and if they are equipped to analyse the data and evaluate their practice.

A feature of successful schools is that they build a collaborative culture, combined with individual responsibility and collective expectations to improve student learning and strengthen communities of practice (Fullan, Gallardo & Hargreaves, 2015). This includes becoming constructive consumers of policy, research, and practice insights, adapting external ideas and influences to the unique learning needs and context of their schools.

Crucial to this is developing and sustaining a professional culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility and shared leadership in and across schools and systems nationally (Fullan et al., 2015). This requires collaboration across all levels of government, as well as between policy-makers and practitioners, driven by a collaborative commitment to a shared set of educational goals. The Melbourne Declaration may have greater impact on teaching and learning if it leverages this collective responsibility, collaboration and accountability, and is owned by teachers and school leaders as part of their professional practice.

Conclusion

Australia will continue to embrace diverse approaches to education, to respond to diverse communities and contexts.

Nevertheless, unity at a national level is required, around a shared set of goals for what Australia's education system aims to achieve. This provides a guarantee to all Australian learners and their families that they can rely on the education system to prepare them for the future, and helps focus collaborative national reform efforts on what matters most.

The Melbourne Declaration shows that establishing such goals is possible, and continues to provide a relevant focus for learning across Australian schools. Yet there remains considerable work to be done to turn these aspirations into action, and achieve the kind of transformative reform anticipated by the Declaration's goals. There is also considerable work to be done to strengthen the alignment between different levels of learning, and ensure that the goals and actions for school education build on the foundations laid in early childhood, and lay the groundwork for positive outcomes beyond the school years.

To turn this vision into reality, Australia needs a national declaration that penetrates more deeply into the education system, and becomes a guiding document for policy-makers and practitioners alike. This may involve rethinking the relationship between policy and practice in achieving the Declaration's goals, and foster dialogue at all levels of the system. If the Melbourne Declaration can become the foundation of decision-making at all levels of educational policy and practice – including through the growing national policy architecture through which educational practice is guided and supported – then it stands a better chance of driving the transformational changes to which it aspires.

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