

Gonski review attacks Australian schooling quality and urges individualised teaching approach

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Gonski review into the quality of Australian schooling has highlighted declining academic performance and recommended school education be radically reformed to tailor teaching and assessment to individual students.

The damning report, released on Monday, says the decline is widespread and “equivalent to a generation of Australian school children falling short of their full learning potential”. In a blunt criticism, it finds “many Australian schools are cruising, not improving”.

Among the constraints in the schooling system are “inflexibility in curriculum delivery, reporting and assessment regimes, and tools focussed on periodic judgements of performance, rather than continuous diagnosis of a student’s learning needs and progress”.

The review proposes the development of “a new online and on demand student learning assessment tool”.

This would enable teachers to assess, regularly and consistently, the progress of the individual student, and give them suggestions about strategies to assist that student.

“There is compelling evidence, in Australian schools and internationally, that tailored teaching based on ongoing formative assessment and feedback are the key to enabling students to progress to higher levels of achievement”.

The review into achieving educational excellence, chaired by businessman David Gonski, who headed the landmark inquiry under Labor into school funding, was ordered by the Turnbull government after it embraced the Gonski needs-based model. The government legislated last year for \$25.3 billion extra funding over a decade.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said in a statement that his government had accepted in principle the latest Gonski report. Many of its 23 recommendations fall within the states’ jurisdictions and state ministers will be briefed on Friday.

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The recommendations in “Through Growth to Achievement” include that all students have a number (Unique Student Identifier) throughout their schooling to track their progress better; the Australian Curriculum be updated based on individual student growth rather than fixed-year levels; greater priority be given to literacy and numeracy in early schooling years; and principals have the autonomy to lead learning in their school communities.

The review also urges strengthening the attractiveness of the teaching and school leadership professions, with clearer career pathways and better recognition of expertise.

The report says that since the start of the new century “Australian student outcomes have declined in key subjects such as reading, science and mathematics. This has occurred in every socio-economic quartile and in all school sectors (government, Catholic and independent).”

“There is also a wide range of educational outcomes in the same classroom or school, with the most advanced students in a year typically five to six years ahead of the least advanced students. Such disparity in learning outcomes is at odds with the goal of equity in education for all students,” the report says.

“Australian education has failed a generation of Australian school children by not enabling them to reach their full learning potential. Dealing with this situation requires a significant shift in aspirations, approach, and practice, to focus on and accelerate individual learning growth for all students, whether they are lower performers, middle ranking or academically advanced”.

The review says “Australia still has an industrial model of school education that reflects a 20th century aspiration to deliver mass education to all children”.

This focusses on trying to have students attain specified outcomes for their grade and age, then moving them in lock-step to the next year. It is not designed to stretch all students to achieve maximum learning growth every year, and it doesn’t encourage schools to continuously improve, the review says.

“Australia needs to start by setting higher expectations for students, educators and schools, and

rejecting the idea that there are natural performance plateaus.”

The review urges a national research and evidence institute be set up to share best practice.

Targeting the problem of “cruising schools”, it says this is one of the causes of stagnating student results.

Cruising schools are those that “maintain average achievement from year to year, but do not improve”.

“This is a significant issue”, the report says. About 30% of primary schools cruise from year to year rather than improve their results at the same rate as similar schools. “Cruising schools achieve outcomes above minimum standards, but deliver lower rates of learning growth than comparable schools where students have similar backgrounds in terms of parental occupation and education.”

The review says that among the priorities of the schooling system should be to “deliver at least one year’s growth in learning for every student every year”. It stresses the importance of early learning, and engaging parents as “partners” in their children’s education.

It says that without a national Unique Service Identifier “the educational history of the student does not transfer automatically from one school to another, meaning that the new school is starting from scratch in attending to that individual’s learning needs”.

Students should be encouraged to give more feedback about their education, the report says, and schools should partner with local industry and community organisations.

An inquiry should be held into years 11 and 12 schooling “to make sure it is contemporary, and adequately prepares students for post-school employment, training, higher education and to live and prosper in a rapidly changing world”.

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The Gonski panel acknowledges the difficulties of achieving reform in a federation. “However, we cannot let the challenge of delivery daunt our ambition”.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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