

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS FOR?

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This continues the series of discussions about what universities are for and what academics are for. Underpinning the tertiary sector are a series of decisions about resource allocation relating to education in general and the school system in particular.

1. The Tyranny of NAPLAN?

NAPLAN results have dominated the education debate for the past two weeks, with the nation's Chief Scientist deploring the declining performance of Australia compared to benchmarks from Europe or Asia.²

At the state level, the debate has moved on from concern about Queensland being below average but with a higher rate of improvement due to structural changes which have effectively added an extra year of secondary schooling.³

The issue has broadened to become concern about the value of participating in this form of national testing. The validity of the test and its reliability depend on ensuring that there is widespread coverage of the total school population. The proclaimed purpose of the exercise is to provide, in the words of Queensland Education Minister Kate Jones, 'an important diagnostic tool that shows a student's strengths and areas needing improvement'.⁴ And, as reported in the *Courier-Mail* on August 7 2015, the President of the State P&C Association, reassured anxious parents and urged them to allow their children to sit the test: 'This isn't a pass or fail high stakes test, it's one piece of information, about one tiny element of children's learning.'

The problem is that nobody believes him. Everyone cares about NAPLAN and newspapers clearly believe that the results affect students, teachers and education policy-makers.

The welter of coverage of the NAPLAN results arises from them being viewed as an international, inter-state, inter-systemic and inter-school benchmark for comparison of achievements. There are persistent reports of schools devoting vast amounts of time in the so-called 'Crowded Curriculum' to NAPLAN preparation. There are heated public discussions about the performance of individual schools and praise for teachers identifiably held responsible for the achievements of their student. (Easily done in small primary schools – Jambin State School with five students in Year 3 topped the state and their teacher Amanda Johnson was interviewed by the *Courier-Mail*). The same

¹ Roger Scott was Director-General of Education in Queensland from 1989-1994

² http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/aug/05/naplan-results-primary-school-students-have-made-few-gains?CMP=ema_1731

³ <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queensland-still-behind-but-improving-in-naplan-20150804-girkzh.html?>

⁴ *Courier-Mail*, 7.8.15.

edition reported that more than 80 percent of Logan children get the poorest marks in the Year 3 test.

There are newspaper articles about the increasingly impressive performance of state schools compared to that of the most expensive private schools which offered until recently a better return on investment as measured by NAPLAN. The *Courier-Mail* on August 6 had a story headlined as 'State school students give private sector a lesson in NAPLAN'.

The problem for governments and educational planners in Queensland is that abnormally large numbers of parents and school communities are opting out of NAPLAN. Queensland has some of the highest rates of withdrawal across the nation – double the national average across some year levels, 11,000 students in all.

Administrators and politicians are clearly worried by this and seek, on the one hand, to minimize NAPLAN's significance beyond its individual diagnostic role and, on the other, to urge parents and schools to participate: 'From this small investment, parents receive individual reports on how well their child is achieving in these key content, compares their performance with students across Australia, identifies their child's strengths and provides information on where their child may need assistance'.⁵

The *Courier-Mail* is doing its bit to condemn non-conformity too, with headlines like 'Tackling Test Truants' above the article referred to above, and one the day before entitled: 'Parents Flunking Big Exam'. The only agency which shows much sympathy for the recalcitrant parents is the Queensland Catholic Education Commission. Its director, Lee-Ann Perry expressed caution about NAPLAN being extended into national testing of science or critical and creative thinking. She also questions the frequency of national testing: 'Are the outcomes worth it, or would the money be better directed to supporting students whose learning needs are high?'.⁶

This shifts the argument firmly towards dealing with inequality within school systems which would require changing the current pattern of federal funding which tends to reward richer school. NAPLAN offers evidence in support of the continuing pattern of inequality. All the indicators provided by NAPLAN underline the vast gap between white Australia and the indigenous communities, shown most graphically in the comparison between the ACT and the Northern Territory.⁷ The Gonski Committee was intended to provide a revised funding model which would address this inequality.

2. Gonski and Inequality

The pre-eminent issue has been the decision of the Abbott government to disown the key recommendations of the Gonski review⁸ aimed at diminishing inequality in the education system. This contradicted an election-eve promise, using the 'black hole' cliché for not providing the expected financial support for the States.

The ALP has not been as forthright as might have been expected on any commitment to reconstitute the funding level recommended by Gonski. One of the reasons for this might be the tepid attitude towards Gonski from the private school sector. Much of the disadvantage experienced is among state school students but also in Catholic schools which cater for a similar socio-economic demographic in their overall school population. But the shakers and movers

⁵ Stanley Rabinowitz, general manager of the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Courier-Mail*, 29 July

⁶ *Courier-Mail*, 29 July.

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/naplans-tale-of-two-territories-why-act-and-nt-are-on-opposite-ends-of-the-spectrum-45696>

⁸ <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf>

among Catholic opinion-leaders are not the parents and staff in these schools. They support the same high prestige institutions as the non-Catholic private schools, for which Gonski has little to offer.⁹

In his very recent comments on education, Bill Shorten has hinted at revisiting the Gonski proposals – perhaps because the electoral arithmetic points in this direction.

3. Why the Focus on STEM?

At both state and national level, the ALP leadership has embraced an enthusiasm for the expansion of education resources devoted to technology and science. This has been welcomed by those concerned about a perceived drift in student preferences at both secondary and tertiary level away from the ‘hard sciences’ often grouped by the acronym STEM : science, technology, engineering and mathematics. However doubts remain about how best to advance particular choices.¹⁰

A recent symposium conducted by the Royal Society Queensland and the Office of the Queensland Chief Scientist recorded the dedicated efforts being made at all levels of the education system to promote the study of STEM.

Summaries of these (20+) contributions are available from the Royal Society’s web-page.¹¹ Three papers deserve close attention from generalist students of public policy concerned with decisions about STEM: ‘Towards a sustainable funding model for STEM education programs in Queensland schools’ by Jackie Mergard and Mary Rowland, ‘The real problem in engineering education’ by Dr David Finch, ‘Easy science: short term gain and long term loss’ by Dr Tanya Scharaschkin.¹²

4. Ideology Beyond STEM

The federal government is still cogitating about the answers to the questions posed above, clear that it should have the right to make decisions in this area despite the protestations of the states. The most recent discussions have focused on the social sciences and humanities, and the teaching of history and geography or some type of integrated alternative. This has served to remind educators and curriculum designers of the outcome of the Donnelly Wiltshire review, even though its recommendations were greeted with indifference at the time.

The Abbott government had appointed a two-person committee to investigate, in effect, the teaching of history and therefore to identify the potential funding required to rectify the perceived

⁹ See Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd, ‘Closing the Wrong Gaps’, *Inside Story*, 24 July 2015, <http://insidestory.org.au/closing-the-wrong-gaps>; and Lindsay Connors and Jim McMorrow, ‘Imperatives in School Funding: Equity, Sustainability, and achievement’, *ACER Education Review*, 14, June 2015: <http://research.acer.edu.au/aer/14/>

¹⁰ Gavin Moodie and Misty Adoniou, ‘Labor’s plans for science, technology, maths education well-meaning but misguided’, *The Conversation*, May 18 2015: <https://theconversation.com/labors-plans-for-science-technology-maths-education-well-meaning-but-misguided-41886>

¹¹ Royal Society (Queensland) website: <http://www.royalsocietyqld.org.au/events/STEM/STEM-Summaries.pdf>.

¹² These papers appear in a compilation of paper summaries on the website: <http://www.royalsocietyqld.org.au/events/STEM/STEM-Summaries.pdf>. Here is the link to my own contribution on the central policy issue (resource allocation) for STEM advocates: http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/_dbase_upl/Central_policy_issues_STEM.pdf

imbalance between our European cultural heritage and the current multicultural reality, requiring a re-programming of teachers and of the curriculum.¹³

The origins of this review were linked in the minds of many educationists to a perception among conservative political leaders that designers of the humanities and social science curriculum and the teaching force which delivered it were hopelessly biased against prevailing social values. Leaving this matter to the experts responsible for a national curriculum framework was not acceptable to federal paymasters. Even though states remain in control of the delivery mechanism, the federal government was well placed to use its discretionary funding influence, particularly in relation to non-state schools and tertiary institutions.

The Donnelly/Wiltshire exercise produced a lot of heat initially but not much light: its excessive delay in reporting followed a preliminary report of notable lack of substance, and then the diversion of attention to criticism of the reputability of one of its consultants meant a loss of momentum.

Wiltshire made notably good sense in his preference for leaving maximum discretion in curriculum choices whereas Donnelly recommended the mandating of not just core sciences but also history – and a particular form of history. He was already on record as wishing to continue ‘the history wars’ by preferencing a Eurocentric curriculum and keeping students away from what he perceived to be ‘trendy’ topics like environmental and indigenous issues.¹⁴

¹³ <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/subjects-trimmed-in-primary-school-curriculum-shakeup-20150305-13w9gs.html>

¹⁴ For expert responses to the Donnelly/Wiltshire Report see *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/national-curriculum-review-experts-respond-26913>.