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Submission to the Consultation on the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025–36

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Submitted on behalf of the School of Education, Faculty of Arts, Society and Business from the University of Wollongong, prepared by Dr Karley Beckman, Deputy Head of School (Research).

The School of Education welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025–36. We endorse the Plan’s ambition to articulate a shared national research agenda across early childhood, schooling, teacher education, VET, and higher education.

Australia’s current policy rhetoric of “evidence-based practice” sits in tension with the structural underinvestment in education research. As the consultation paper documents, government R&D spending on education is small relative to other fields (approximately 1:142 compared with health) and ARC investment in education has been both modest and concentrated, with only 159 ARC projects funded under the primary FOR code for Education from 2015–2025. This funding profile is misaligned with education’s social and economic centrality and constrains the sector’s capacity to generate and translate the evidence required by the sector.

Our submission addresses Questions 1, 2, 3, and 6, with an emphasis on rebuilding funding and capability, rebalancing the evidence base, and strengthening translation to enhance the visibility and societal value of research as a mechanism to meet the priority areas outlined in the report.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 1

What are the key areas or issues for future research in each field or sector?

A key priority is to enhance the **value and increase funding of education research** in an environment that increasingly valorises “evidence” while starving the field of resources. The Decadal Plan should explicitly position funding and capability as pre-conditions for any credible move to evidence-informed policy. The ratio of education to health R&D spending and the small number of ARC-funded education projects over a decade are not just sector complaints; they are empirical indicators of a structural problem that undermines the state’s ability to meet its own evidence standards.

A second priority concerns the **epistemic balance of the evidence base**. In recent years there is an increased focus on the use of data and scientific evidence to inform educational practice within all education sectors. We acknowledge the valuable contributions to learning and behaviour by other disciplines such as psychology, but not all aspects of education are not reducible to psychological constructs; it is enacted in institutions, communities, cultures, and relationships, and is bounded by policy, governance and funding structures. Over-reliance on scientific models of “what works” narrowly frame educational research and overlook research on pedagogy, curriculum, equity, system design, and teacher professional judgment. This is also evidenced in the policy environment within school systems and accreditation requirements of initial teacher education programs. For example, nationally accredited Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs in Australia must embed mandated core content within their programs that prioritise evidence-based approaches such as the science of learning within their course content ([AITSL, 2024](#)). Additionally, state government research agendas provide a narrow scope of research that



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prioritises quantitative large-scale studies of “what works” (e.g. [NSW Department of Education's Evidence Needs](#), 2024).

Research should be **independent of shifting ministerial agendas**, and while the Australian Research Council (ARC) provides a degree of protection for academic autonomy, this independence is increasingly undermined by state-level education funding schemes that restrict research to department-approved priorities and political timelines, thereby narrowing the scope of inquiry. Some limitations of ministerial involvement include:

- Research partnerships become vulnerable to political cycles and ministerial turnover, as departmental research priorities in both NSW and Queensland are explicitly aligned with current government strategies and leadership agendas, meaning that changes in ministers or political direction can abruptly shift or discontinue research programs, creating instability for long-term or system-wide investigations.
- The scope of permissible research is restricted, because both jurisdictions require external research to align with departmental frameworks thereby discouraging or excluding research that challenges policy orthodoxy or addresses politically sensitive topics.
- Evidence risks being curated to fit policy agendas rather than independently generated, as policy reviews such as Strong Beginnings have been shown to selectively foreground or background evidence according to ministerial narratives, illustrating how politically driven reform agendas shape what counts as legitimate evidence in high-stakes areas like teacher education.
- Critical or independent research voices can be suppressed, because access to data, schools, and departmental partnership opportunities is dependent on ministerial and departmental approval; researchers may self-censor to avoid jeopardising relationships.
- School and teacher autonomy in research participation is diminished, since central approval systems in both states override local decision-making; for example, Queensland requires centralised assessment of many applications, and NSW directs researchers to engage only with topics aligned to departmental evidence needs, reducing opportunities for school-initiated, contextually relevant research agendas.
- Narrow evidence frames are reinforced, because minister-driven agendas favour particular forms of evidence in line with departmental frameworks such as NSW's What Works Best, which privileges specific evidence-informed practices and performance metrics, potentially marginalising broader sociocultural, critical, or community-led research traditions that are central to addressing systemic inequity.

Third, we must **enhance research translation and impact**. The paper notes persistent siloing and barriers that inhibit research–practice collaboration and lead to duplicated effort. Translation should not be an afterthought at the end of a grant; it should be an infrastructure and a practice, resourced, professionalised, and evaluated. Building capability of researchers to partner with stakeholders and develop meaningful and measurable impact will make education research more visible and valued across society. Research translation and impact is already prioritised within higher education sectors, however, it must also be recognised that these activities are time intensive (and often at the cost of academic outputs). There is a need to 1) address expectations of timelines between researchers and beneficiaries which may diminish the value of research impact, and 2) review the workload implications of research translation and impact within HE to incentivise prioritization of these activities.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 2

What steps should we take to drive short-term gains and long-term advancement in these areas?

In the short term, policy can achieve real gains by stabilising and targeting investment to rebuild capacity where it will most immediately improve practice. This includes **increasing the share of national competitive funding allocated to education**, with explicit criteria for collaborative projects between researchers and education settings; translation fellowships that buy practitioner and researcher time to work together; and rapid improvements to data access and linkage so that evidence is timely and actionable.

Workforce and pipeline reforms must accompany infrastructure. The decline in HDR enrolments is a warning sign: without a robust research training pipeline, supported by scholarships that reflect cost of living, structured industry and practice placements, and clear academic-practice career paths, Australia



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will not have the people to generate and translate evidence. The consultation paper's analysis of workload, career fragmentation, and casualisation in higher education and teaching reinforces this point; research capacity cannot be built on precarious labour.

To rebalance the evidence base, the Plan should **encourage multi-disciplinary programs led by education researchers**, and that are assessed on their relevance to equity and system reform. This will mitigate the drift toward single-lens policy and ensure that research responds to the realities of classrooms and communities described in the paper's sector snapshots.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 3

What mechanisms are most effective for addressing the aims of the decadal plan?

The aims of the Decadal Plan require institutional mechanisms. We support establishing an independent, nationally mandated coordination body for education research that can: set priorities; manage shared infrastructure and data standards; convene cross-sector consortia; and run translation programs with education settings. This would operationalise the consultation paper's call for a connected, impactful national educational research capability and its emphasis on ending siloed effort.

Funding mechanisms should be redesigned to incorporate translation as a funded, professional activity (e.g. co-design phases, school-based research leads, ECEC practitioner-fellows, VET implementation partners), and impact support (synthesis, implementation coaching, open resources) as core budget lines rather than optional add-ons. This also requires incentivising involvement in research within education sectors.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 6

What systematic changes are required to embed first nations perspectives and practices into curriculum and learning frameworks?

Embedding First Nations perspectives must be a system reform, not an additive curriculum element. The consultation paper identifies workforce shortages of Indigenous educators, inconsistent cultural responsiveness in mainstream practice, and resourcing constraints—especially in remote areas. Research and policy must therefore move from “inclusion” to First Nations leadership, with governance, funding, and research design co-determined with communities.

One **examples of effective research-based, community-led and culturally responsive approach** is [the Curriculum and Conscious Communities](#) program led by the Indigenous Strategy Unit at the University of Wollongong. The program provides pedagogical practice focused on facilitating relationships with Country which then informs the curriculum transformation journey, recognising Country as the holder of all knowledge and lore.

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