

A Response to the Consultation Paper for the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025-36

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*This submission is made in a personal capacity and does not represent the official position of any organisation I am affiliated with.

The strategic context of Australian education research

The release of the consultation paper, *Charting Australian Education Research: Priorities and Future Directions*, marks a pivotal moment for the Australian education research community. As the first attempt to establish a ten-year roadmap for the sector, the *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025-36* arrives at a time of significant transition and, arguably, systemic crisis. Education is fundamental to the health of the Australian democracy, shaping the social, economic, and wellbeing outcomes of the citizenry from early childhood to tertiary engagement and beyond. Despite the immense societal value of this enterprise, educational research in Australia has historically struggled for visibility, resourcing, and impact.

The current state of Australian education research is characterised by a profound fragmentation, often described in academic discourse as the “paradigm wars”. This fragmentation has led to a tragedy of the commons, where the finite resources of funding, institutional prestige, and public trust are depleted by competing factions rather than being stewarded for the collective advancement of the field. In this context, the *Decadal Plan* must be more than a mere collection of priority areas; it must be a rigorous framework for reconciliation and a bold statement of future intent of a unified field. The consultation paper is about as far from a unified vision as it can be.

Unfortunately but predictably, the consultation paper reflects a narrow, sociological, and practice-based view of what constitutes educational research, completely ignoring the substantial community of researchers engaged in educational psychology and the learning sciences in Australia. Furthermore, the lack of attention given to the transformative impact of technology in the draft plan, and specifically artificial intelligence (AI), is, frankly, dumbfounding. This response aims to address these gaps, arguing that a *Decadal Plan* that ignores the cognitive foundations of learning and the technological shifts of the 2020s is professionally discourteous, anachronistic, and destined for irrelevance.

The exclusionary nature of the consultation paper

The consultation paper frames the future of educational research through several priority areas: justice, quality, and equity; a prepared workforce; and cross-sector collaboration. While these are undeniably important, the paper's interpretation of these themes is almost exclusively sociological and political. Equity is defined primarily through the lenses of geography, socio-economic status, race, and gender. While these variables are critical for understanding the systemic barriers to education, they do not account for the cognitive and biological mechanisms through which learning actually occurs.

It is completely inappropriate that the many people engaged in research in educational psychology and the learning sciences are effectively rendered invisible in this document. Educational research is a multi-dimensional enterprise that depends on an understanding of students' cognitive development as much as their social backgrounds. The learning sciences integrate insights from cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience to understand how learners acquire, process, and retain knowledge. By failing to feature these fields, the consultation paper marginalises a robust and highly impactful segment of the education research community as though we do not even exist.

This exclusion is not just a matter of professional discourtesy; it has profound implications for the quality of the evidence base informing Australian policy and practice. Without a grounding in the learning sciences, interventions designed to improve equity and quality are often based on outdated or misinformed educational practices. For example, the paper discusses workforce shortages and teacher de-professionalisation. However, it fails to connect these issues to the frustration many teachers feel when they lack access to the most effective, research-backed pedagogical strategies. When teaching practice is divorced from an understanding of how the mind learns, student results plateau, and the profession suffers.

The establishment of the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) was a significant attempt to bring the learning sciences to the forefront of Australian education. AERO's model of teaching and learning, grounded in explicit instruction and cognitive load theory, provides practical, evidence-based guidance to educators. Yet, there is a clear tension between AERO's mandate and the traditional educational research establishment represented by the majority of university-based researchers and bodies like AARE.

The consultation paper's sociological tilt appears to align with the critiques from researchers in the sociology of education that portray the learning sciences as narrow or prescriptive. This perpetuates a false binary between social justice research and the learning sciences. In reality, the most effective way to achieve equity is to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, have access to instruction grounded in how the mind works. The *Decadal Plan* must bridge this divide rather than further entrenching it. This is not a holistic, comprehensive plan for Australian education research but rather a plan for select sub-disciplines only.

Representative failure

The consultation paper states that the plan is being developed in collaboration with the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and AARE. It is fundamentally inappropriate for AARE to be the primary voice speaking for educational research in Australia. Historical and contemporary evidence suggests that AARE has maintained an open disdain for research paradigms that do not align with social theory and particular ideological perspectives. AARE does not, despite whatever claims it might make, speak for all education research in Australia.

The evolution of AARE since the late 1980s has been marked by an overt politicisation and a rejection of what its leadership termed 'third person science'. This ideological shift has seen a move away from empirical psychological research and a movement towards postcolonial, feminist, and critical social justice frameworks. While these perspectives are valid and important, they cannot and should not define the entire field of educational research. Doing so is the worst kind of exclusionary epistemic hubris.

This ideological gatekeeping excludes many of the most productive researchers in Australian educational research, who find their work undervalued and ignored by the very association that claims to represent them. The *Decadal Plan* requires a governance structure that is genuinely inclusive and representative of the breadth of the field, not one that prioritises a partisan view of what counts as educational research.

The ongoing dominance of these paradigm wars has contributed to the relatively poor performance of educational researchers in major funding schemes. When the peak representative body is seen as more interested in social theory and 'problematism' than in solving the problems in education, the field's reputation among policymakers and the public suffers. The perception that educational research is riddled with fundamental disagreements and consumed by ideological agendas has made it an easy target for funding cuts and underinvestment. As we are all aware, an assortment of gifters have moved into the space and now have the ear of governments, school sectors, and many parts of the profession.

For the *Decadal Plan* to achieve its aim of growing investment in Australian education research, it must demonstrate a commitment to scientific excellence and practical impact. This cannot happen under the leadership of a body that has historically been hostile to the empirical paradigms necessary to achieve such a goal. A broader, more diverse steering committee and approach to developing this plan are essential.

The consultation paper correctly identifies that Australian education research is under-resourced. However, it fails to mention the poor performance of educational researchers in national competitive grant schemes, such as those administered by the Australian Research Council (ARC). This situation represents a classic tragedy of the commons, in which the field's

overall health is destroyed by internal divisions and a failure to agree on a common quality standard. The crisis is even more pronounced when examining the schemes designed to support the next generation of researchers. This decay of the research pipeline is a direct result of the squeeze on funding and the increasing difficulty of competing against more cohesive STEM and health disciplines.

The paradigm wars aggravate these issues. When educational researchers attack one another's methodologies in peer review (often on ideological rather than scientific grounds), they lower the overall quality of applications from the sector. This lack of internal cohesion makes educational research look unsound to assessors from other fields, leading to lower success rates and a further reduction in the common resource of research funding.

AARE has systematically failed to address these deepening divisions in the field. In fact, it seems to me that AARE is partly responsible for this deepening. That those of us in Australian educational research who are not engaged in particular research paradigms have been completely excluded from this planning process to date says it all.

AI and the digital transformation

It is also frankly bizarre that technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), does not feature heavily in the consultation paper. As we navigate the mid-2020s, AI is reshaping every aspect of the educational enterprise, from how students learn and write to how teachers assess and personalise instruction. The federal government has already launched a National AI Plan 2025, committing over \$460 million to AI initiatives and identifying the technology as a key lever for productivity and innovation. Developing a ten-year plan without technology as a central pillar is a profound strategic failure.

Among the many challenges these technologies have brought, AI promises many opportunities to transform the way we teach, learn, and assess. AI-powered adaptive learning systems can personalise support for students with disabilities or those in remote regions where teacher access is limited. Yet, the consultation paper mentions technology only in passing and AI not at all. There are potentially grave implications if educational researchers are left out of the equation as these technologies impact on learning and teaching. The future of education cannot be left to the grifters and tech bros to determine.

The impact of generative AI on assessment is already a seismic shift, particularly for the higher education sector. Institutions are being forced to rethink the very nature of their degrees, moving towards a regulatory framework that distinguishes between secure assessments (in-person, supervised) and open assessments that promote the responsible use of AI. Australian educational researchers have been at the cutting edge of this work and are leading the world. Through our research, the focus of this redesign is shifting from just catching cheats to adopting

sophisticated approaches to preparing students for an AI-rich world.

The *Decadal Plan* must prioritise research that addresses this transition. We need a rigorous evidence base to understand:

- What impact is AI having on learning processes, and how can this understanding inform curriculum.
- How to assess AI-assisted work fairly and develop new multimodal literacy standards.
- The impact of AI on teacher workload and instructional leadership.

By ignoring these issues, the *Decadal Plan* abdicates its responsibility to provide a roadmap for the future. The tech companies and consultants who have become ‘experts’ in AI (seemingly overnight) are more than willing to step into this void. Researchers at the intersection of the learning sciences and educational technology are poised to and indeed need to have a substantial impact over the lifetime of this plan, but they are also currently being left out of the conversation. Both the plan and the approach must be altered to address this omission lest it have a very limited shelf life.

Response to consultation question 1: Key areas for future research

The following response outlines the priority research areas that must be included to ensure the *Decadal Plan* is relevant to the 21st-century educational landscape.

1. Integrating the learning sciences with pedagogical practice

Future research must prioritise the translation of cognitive science and educational psychology into practical, classroom-ready strategies. We need a deeper understanding of how the human mind acquires complex knowledge and how to help students develop the kinds of adaptive skills required to flourish in the age of AI. This research should focus on:

- The effectiveness of models of instruction in diverse Australian contexts.
- Self-regulated learning, critical thinking and problem-solving.
- Countering widespread neuromyths that continue to influence teacher practice.

2. The impact of technology on learning and teaching

Research into the impact of technologies, particularly AI, must be a top priority across all sectors. This includes:

- How to ensure that technology augments and doesn’t aim to replace the critical human and social elements of education.

- Investigating how AI-XR (extended reality) technologies can support students' learning.
- Developing AI-driven adaptive learning systems that assist teachers to personalise instruction for equity groups.
- Analysing the ethical and social implications of AI use in schools, particularly for First Nations and disadvantaged communities.

3. Redesigning assessment for an AI-rich environment

There is an urgent need for research evaluating new assessment models. This includes:

- Scaling secure, authentic, and program-level assessment designs.
- Using AI to support learning while maintaining academic integrity.
- Developing national standards for the ethical use of digital tools in assessment.

4. Psychological drivers of teacher retention and student wellbeing

We must move beyond the sociological analysis of the workforce and student engagement. Research should focus on the psychological and behavioural drivers of these issues:

- The impact of evidence-based practice on teacher self-efficacy and burnout.
- The relationship between instructional quality and student mental health.
- Using data linkage to track the cumulative impact of educational and social interventions on long-term student trajectories.

Response to consultation question 2: Steps for short-term and long-term advancement

Driving advancement in educational research requires a dual approach that addresses immediate needs while building a sustainable future.

Short-term gains: Actions for 2025-2027

1. **Broaden the scope of the decadal plan:** The steering committee must be expanded to include researchers from the learning sciences, educational psychology, and educational technology. This will ensure the final plan is not exclusionary and remains relevant over the ten-year period it is intended to cover.
2. **Align with national AI plans and frameworks:** The Decadal Plan should explicitly incorporate the objectives and funding streams of the National AI Plan 2025, and the national AI frameworks for schools and higher education. This includes prioritising education in the new AI Accelerator grants.
3. **Support translation infrastructure:** Educational researchers should focus on working

with, rather than against, national bodies, including the proposed new Commission, to accelerate the translation of research into practice.

Long-term advancement: Strategic goals for 2036

1. **Modernise research training (HDR):** The Universities Accord's recommendations for HDR reform must be implemented, with a focus on equipping education PhD students with skills in data science, cognitive science, and technological design.
2. **End the paradigm wars through principled eclecticism:** We must move past the tragedy of the commons by establishing shared standards of quality and impact. We must figure out how to agree to disagree, at a minimum.

Response to consultation question 3: Effective mechanisms for addressing aims

The success of the *Decadal Plan* depends on the mechanisms used to implement and monitor its progress.

As stated previously, AARE is not an appropriate body to speak for the entire educational research sector. We need a more diverse national education research council that includes representation from those currently excluded from the conversation. In particular, the newly established Learning and Instruction Society of Australasia (LISA) should have representation in this discussion. LISA is a society made up of educational researchers in educational psychology and the learning sciences who do not feel that we belong within, or have been excluded from, the development of this plan to date.

The paradigm wars in Australian educational research have created a negative feedback loop, in which internal conflict has led to a loss of external funding and reputation. In our field, the freedom of different sub-groups to wage ideological war unchecked has undermined the collective's ability to secure research investment and policy influence. Nefarious actors with only an interest in extracting resources for themselves have taken advantage of this situation. The division must end.

The solution is a social contract among educational researchers that limits individual interest for the sake of the collective good. The *Decadal Plan* must be that social contract, or at least commit to a more productive relationship between sub-disciplines. We must move past the war between paradigms and settle on a rigorous, evidence-informed framework that can win the trust of the government and the public. That process begins with a more representative approach to developing and implementing this plan, rather than putting forward a plan that completely ignores the work of so many engaged in educational research in Australia.

A vision for 2036

The *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025-36* must be an inclusive, visionary document that prepares the nation for a future characterised by technological change and cognitive challenge. This cannot be achieved by a plan that is stuck in the sociological debates of the 1990s.

I reiterate that the exclusion of educational psychology and the learning sciences from this document and process, as though we and our work do not exist, is deeply regrettable and professionally discourteous. These fields are not peripheral; they are foundational. A decadal plan that ignores the "how" of learning is like a medical research plan that ignores biology. We must move past the ridiculous paradigm wars and create a space where sociological, psychological, and technological perspectives can work together to solve the crises in education.

The strange lack of attention to technology and AI in this paper must be corrected in the final plan. As the National AI Plan 2025 makes clear, AI is a whole-of-economy transformation that requires a robust research response. Educational researchers must be at the forefront of this, ensuring that the technology is used ethically, safely, and effectively to improve outcomes for all learners. As it is, the plan feels anachronistic now, let alone in ten years.

The leadership of this plan must be broadened beyond AARE to ensure it is representative of the entire field. AARE does not speak for all of us. AARE has, in fact, spoken against many of us and the work we do. This plan again shows this bias and a lack of representation across the spectrum of educational research. We need a governance structure that values scientific rigour, technological innovation, and practical impact. By doing so, we can reverse the decay of our common research resources and build a world-class educational research capability that truly serves the Australian people, including, most importantly, teachers and students.

People working at the intersection of the learning sciences and educational technology are ready to lead this transformation. The *Decadal Plan* must acknowledge their contribution and provide them with the support needed to shape the future of Australian education. The current consultation paper is an inadequate foundation for such an important task. The plan currently does not even acknowledge that we exist. It must be substantially revised to present a vision of a unified field that is ready and willing to meet the challenges of the next decade.

Many of us in the learning sciences and educational psychology would be happy to assist in the development and implementation of this plan if the committee would be willing to include us, our work, and our voices. Alternatively, we would appreciate it being more accurately labelled the *Decadal Plan for Australian Sociology of Education Research 2025-36*, and we will develop our own plans accordingly.