

Gonski backflips put indigenous students in limbo

Talking point



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During the election campaign, Tony Abbott declared that his tenure could be judged on fixing Australia's greatest "national failure" of dire indigenous disadvantage. The Prime Minister's commitment will be seriously undermined if his government goes ahead with scrapping the principles and six-year funding commitments made by the former government based on the Gonski review of education funding.

According to the final report of the Review of School Funding, low socioeconomic status, indigeneity, disability, English language proficiency and remoteness are all factors contributing to disadvantage in education and requiring additional funding loadings on top of a base rate.

The report also says that students who experience multiple factors of disadvantage are at the highest risk of

poor performance and concluded that "while compound disadvantage is not something experienced exclusively by indigenous students... indigenous students are over-represented in all categories of disadvantage".

The application of the Gonski formula would also provide more help to government schools because more of the students who qualify for the additional needs-based loading attend them. In 2010, 85 per cent of indigenous students, 78 per cent of students with disabilities and 83 per cent of students in remote and very remote areas attended government schools, compared with a national figure of 66 per cent.

In its final interpretation of the Gonski review, the previous government ensured there was a loading for every indigenous student in Australia - about 140,000 students across the country. Additional funding would flow to indigenous students, irrespective of their school sector or number of indigenous students at the individual school.

For example, in Queensland,

according to analysis published by Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* in June, state school data shows remote schools with a high proportion of indigenous students would have been the biggest potential winners under the national plan, if that state had signed up to the offer made at the time.

Under the new Abbott deal announced on Monday, schools in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory will get \$1.2 billion over four years, but it is not clear whether the loadings for indigeneity and other disadvantage will apply in the new "no strings attached" proposition and, therefore, if the money will flow to those most in need. It is also much less than under the former federal government's commitment over six years.

And, of course, we know that education matters for a range of other outcomes - a recent Productivity Commission staff working paper concluded that: "Education stands out as the critical factor associated with improving life chances."

In particular, the link between

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Excerpt from a recent Productivity Commission staff working paper

education and employment has been recognised by Andrew Forrest, the Prime Minister's personal appointment to review indigenous employment programs.

Mr Forrest's Australian Employment Covenant has also found one of the impediments to employers hiring indigenous people is their poor level of literacy and numeracy and other core skills.

This education disadvantage flows through to acquiring the higher skills needed for jobs in our economy now and into the future. Analysis published in 2012 found that 70 per

cent of the new jobs created in the five years to 2016-17 will require at least a Certificate III qualification. Yet only 37 per cent of indigenous people aged over 15 have completed Year 12 or its equivalent.

A recent COAG Reform Council report found that after leaving school, 60 per cent of indigenous young people aged 17 to 24 were not fully engaged in work or study, compared to 26 per cent of non-indigenous young people in 2011. For those who are, indigenous participants in VET are more likely to be studying at below Certificate III and are less likely to pass their VET subjects.

Until we improve educational outcomes for indigenous school students, our employment, training, health and criminal justice systems will continue to wrestle with the consequences and Mr Abbott will be judged as failing to reverse our dire indigenous disadvantage.

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