

Occasional Address
Royal Exhibition Building, 8 December 2018, 11.00am

Professor Barry McGaw AO
Emeritus Professor, Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Dean, graduands, Ladies and Gentlemen, I delivered my first Occasional Address in Adelaide on April Fools' Day in 2011. Beforehand, Alan Fels, then Chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, advised me that were three things one does in an Occasional Address. First, say what an honour it is to have been invited. Second, say, "I am not worthy of the honour." Third, prove it. I will hope not to do that today.

This is my fourth Occasional Address and I am doubly honoured, in the invitation to speak and in the conferral of the Honorary Doctorate.

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Now, let me take you on part of the journey through which my understanding of equity in Australian education has been sharpened.

In the 1990s, I was commissioned to review the curriculum and assessment of the NSW Higher School Certificate. As in all States and Territories range of subjects offered had been widened but New South Wales increased the range of courses within subjects.

In English, there were four courses, differentiated by level of intellectual demand.

I had State-wide data on students' performances in English at Year 10 so I looked at the Year 11 enrolment choices of the Year 10 high performers. In government, non-selective secondary schools, they were most likely to be in one of the two most demanding Year 11 English courses if they were in the northern beach suburbs of Sydney but in one of the two least demanding courses if they were in the SW Sydney suburbs.

Why the difference? It turned out to be obvious. The schools in the northern beach suburbs generally did not offer the less demanding courses. The schools in the SW Sydney suburbs generally did not offer the more demanding courses. The differentiated curriculum that existed on paper at the State level did not exist at the school level.

NSW had differentiated its curriculum to produce equity but had produced inequity.

I recommended less differentiation. Critics said that would dumb down the curriculum. I said that it would level it up, though I had no real data to prove that would be possible. The government, however, accepted my recommendation and reduced the differentiation.

At the end of 1990s, I moved to Paris to head OECD's work on education just before its new Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) collected its first data. Australia was among the high-performing countries, significantly behind only Finland in reading and equal with Finland in mathematics and science.

The data also showed that, in Australia, differences in students' social backgrounds made more difference in their educational achievements than differences in social background did in some other high-performing countries such as Canada, Korea, Japan and Finland. Australian education was high-quality but low-equity while these others were high-quality and high-equity. Now, I had the evidence I needed when I was reviewing the NSW Higher School Certificate. It is possible for a country to achieve equity while also achieving high quality.

Without data, we would not know this.

Since 2000, Australia gone in the wrong direction on both counts. Both quality and equity have declined.

Without data, we would not know this.

To turn this around, we will need to see improvement at the school level since that is where education is delivered. The *My School* website compares schools with students from similar social backgrounds reveals marked differences in students' performances. Those with low-performances cannot blame their students because other do so much better with similar students. The high-performing schools can be a source of improved practice for the low-performing ones.

Without data, they would not know where to look.

One significant critic said NAPLAN should be abolished because students' performances have not improved. That's like saying that, if your diet is not reducing your weight, you should throw away the scales.

By all means, join debates about what we should measure in education but don't turn your back on data.

Data are driving changes everywhere in our modern lives. I was in South Korea last week at the 6th OECD World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy. The Nobel Prize-winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz, emphasised the importance of data and metrics in shaping behaviour in a wide range of domains, public and private.

In your professional practice, you will have many sources of information on the progress of your students, including your own very local, clinical assessments. Embrace them but don't abandon the evidence that comes from larger data sets that give you a broader perspective.

Without the evidence that such data can provide, I would still be where I was in reviewing the NSW Higher School Certificate, saying that you could achieve high quality and high equity at the same time. Now I know you can.

Citation for Doctor of Laws (honoris causa)

Professor Barry McGaw has had a distinguished career in educational research and policy.

Following an early career as a science teacher, then head of the Research and Curriculum Branch in the Queensland Department of Education, he was appointed at the age of 34 as Professor of Education at Murdoch University. There he established a reputation that led to influential roles in educational research and policy as Executive Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research in Melbourne and Director for Education at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris.

Following retirement from the OECD, he took a series of part-time roles in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education including founding Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute, a Vice-Chancellor's Fellow and Interim Director of the Assessment Research Centre. He continues at the University of Melbourne as a part-time Professorial Fellow and Co-Director of the Australian National Development Index project.

McGaw served on the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission and chaired reviews of upper secondary curriculum and assessment in WA and the ACT, and undertook a major review of the NSW Higher School Certificate as a sole reviewer. In 2008, he was appointed by the Australian Government as the foundation Chair of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) which produced the first national curriculum for Australia, now adopted for Foundation Year to Year 10 across the country.

Alongside his leadership roles, Professor McGaw has more than 100 personal publications.

Professor McGaw has also made a substantial contribution to professional associations including the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Australian College of Educators.

*Chancellor, I present to you, **EMERITUS PROFESSOR BARRY MCGAW AO** for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.*