

Briefings

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From the Executive Director

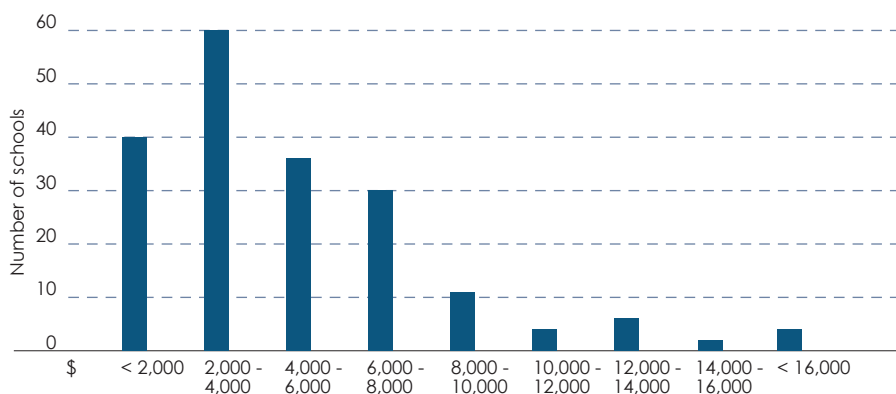
The facts on school fees

The commencement of the new school year predictably once again saw a range of media stories focusing on school fees.

The media coverage¹ portrays a completely different picture to reality when it comes to school fees for the Queensland independent schools sector. Whilst the coverage focused on “sensational” reports about the costs of sending a child to a private school, the fact is in 2015 the average per student fee (including compulsory charges) for Queensland independent schools was \$6,436². Further, 86% of Queensland independent schools had average per student fees of less than \$8,000 in 2015.

Comparing and commenting on school fees is fraught with danger. Arrangements vary on an individual school basis with some schools charging an all-inclusive fee, whilst others may have compulsory charges in addition to published fees (for example, for text books, resource materials or information technology). The data for 2015

Figure 1: Number of schools by average fee range – Queensland Independent Schools 2015



indicates that about 20% of independent schools charge an all-inclusive fee.

Many independent schools provide a fee discount for siblings, whilst others may provide a discount for the fees paid in advance or in full at the start of the school year.

The diversity of school fees levels across the independent sector reflects the inherent diversity of the sector itself.

As outlined in Figure 1, over half of all Queensland independent schools (52%) had average per

student fees and charges of less than \$4,000. Only 16 Queensland independent schools had average per student fees and charges in excess of \$10,000 in 2015.

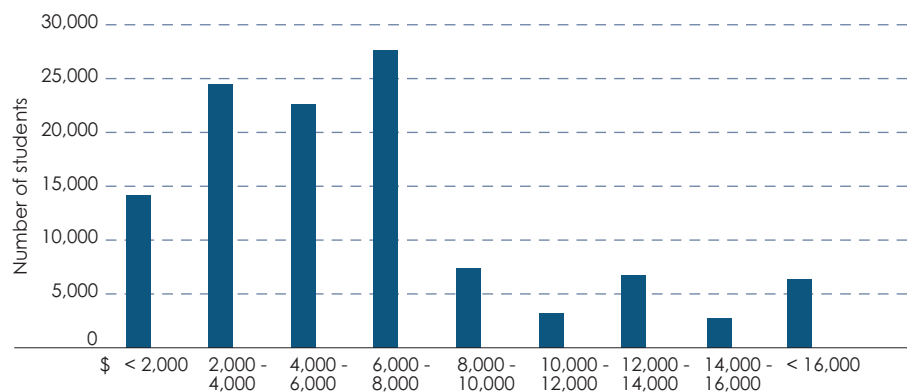
The school median fees and charges was \$3,918 in 2015.

¹ Receiving prominent media coverage was an Australian Scholarships Group's report that the estimated average cost of educating a child born in 2017 in a private school across metropolitan Australia would be \$487,093. The Australian Scholarships Group's data has been challenged by the Independent Schools Council of Australia which says the median Australian metropolitan independent school fee was \$6,079 per annum in 2015 (see <http://isca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Media-Release-17-January-2017-ASG.pdf>).

² Data is sourced from the latest unpublished 2015 Financial Questionnaire for Non-Government Schools. A sub-set of this data is published on the *My School* website.

The facts on school fees

Figure 2: Number of students by average fee range – Queensland Independent Schools 2015



As illustrated in Figure 2, the majority of students (53%) in the Queensland independent sector were at schools with average per student fees of less than \$6,000. Just 6% of enrolments were at independent schools with average fees in excess of \$16,000.

It is an accepted fact that parents choosing an independent school in Australia will need to contribute to the costs of the school through the payment of fees. Although, it should be recognised that independent schools accredited as Special Assistance Schools (SAS) do not charge fees as required under the legislation's definition of an SAS. These schools cater for disengaged students.

Most Majority Indigenous Schools also charge little or no fees with some of these schools receiving payments from ABSTUDY in respect of their students.

There are considerable differences in the fees charged by individual independent schools. For 2015, the lowest average per student fee for a Queensland independent school (other than a Special Assistance or Majority Indigenous School) was \$195, whilst the highest was \$22,016.

There are a range of factors which determine the level of a school's fees including the amount of government funding support received, the educational program offered, co-curricular programs and the student-teacher ratios.

Of particular importance is the level of government funding. In 2015, for mainstream Queensland independent schools combined Commonwealth and State recurrent grants can be as low as \$5,000 per student. The median combined Commonwealth and State recurrent funding was \$10,066 per student in 2015.

Australian Government funding for an independent school is determined by the capacity of parents to contribute to education costs (as measured by the socio-economic status of the school community) as well as loadings for student disadvantage. The needs based approach applied by governments means those with the greatest need receive more funding.

Independent schools also apply differential fee levels for primary and secondary education including for some schools, different levels within primary and secondary year levels. This reflects the considerable difference in costs in providing primary and secondary education. Often ignored in commentary on school fees is the fact that parents make a significant contribution to the capital costs of independent schools. In 2015, Queensland independent schools allocated 10% of their fee income for capital purposes.

A key finding of the Independent Schools Queensland research *Parent Perceptions of Schooling Options* (October 2014)³, was the perception that independent schools are "expensive". Despite some arguing that independent schools are in fact not expensive, it is important to recognise that "expensive" is a relative term related to a person's available resources.

³ For details of the research, see http://www.isq.qld.edu.au/files/file/News%20and%20Media/Publications/ParentsPerceptionReport_21102014_email.pdf

Table 1: Fast facts on fees and charges – Queensland Independent Schools 2015

Median school fee and compulsory charges	\$3,918
Average per student income from fees and compulsory charges	\$6,436
Number of schools with average per student fees and charges less than \$8,000	166 (86%)
Percentage of fees and compulsory charges allocated to capital works	10%

Whilst the data for 2015 on school fees suggests that an independent school education is more affordable and in reach of more parents than portrayed by media reports, the challenge for schools is to reassure families that the payment of school fees, no matter the amount, is an important investment and provides value for money.

The continuing increase in the number of students attending independent schools across the nation would indicate that parents are prepared to pay school fees and that they consider them to be value for money and a worthwhile investment in their child's future.



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Evaluation and education: measuring what matters

“Give me something new and prove that it works” (Bernholz, 2011).

“The word assess comes from the Latin root meaning ‘to sit beside.’ For teachers, as for students, the most effective evaluation comes from someone who sits beside us and helps us grow” (Tomlinson, 2012).

The case for evaluation

How do teachers, school leaders and governors determine what innovation will have the greatest impact on the outcomes of young people? Bernholz (2011) describes this challenge as working to balance “two competing forces – the pressure to do something new and the pressure to do something proven”.

Schools seek new approaches to improving their governance, leadership and instruction to ensure the best possible outcomes for every student. Innovation that improves outcomes is critical for schools to remain competitive, as educational delivery improves across systems and jurisdictions.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that “education systems around the world are increasingly focussing on the evaluation of students, teachers and schools as part of their drive to help students do better and improve results.

Rising demand for quality school education and a trend towards greater school autonomy in some countries are among the factors behind this new focus” (2013).

As Australia’s results on national and internationally standardised testing plateau or decline in real terms, there is increasing pressure from policy makers and the public to justify educational funding and investment (Wernet, O’Grady and Rodreiguez, 2017). Federal Senator Scott Ryan has said, “it is clear the increased investment in schools by successive governments has not translated into better results” (Ferrari, 2014).

However, despite concern about the use of school funding, the Grattan Institute report *Circuit Breaker: A new compact on school funding* states that “emerging evidence internationally shows that well-targeted school funding can make a big difference” (2016). The report comments that “investments need to be made to help teachers make better use of evidence-based teaching practices. The use of data, evidence and feedback to adapt and improve teaching has very large effects. Teachers also improve when they receive meaningful appraisal and feedback, with opportunities to observe others and share practices and ideas” (2016).

Where evidence-based practices are introduced, they become innovations. Drucker states that “innovation is work rather than genius. It requires knowledge. It often requires ingenuity. And it requires focus... It may be difficult, but knowledge-based innovation can be managed. Success requires a commitment to the systematic practice of innovation” (1985).

Evaluation is the work needed to ensure new approaches, innovations or interventions are worthy of initial, or continuing investment. Effective evaluation informs a school leader or governor’s decision making and can persuade teachers that the time and resources required to implement an innovation that leads to the desired outcomes for every student, is worth it.

What does evaluation in school look like?

School leaders, teachers and governors are in the position of having to select and implement innovations that may have the desired impact on student well-being, achievement or outcomes.

Despite increasing information about what works, including the meta-analyses by Hattie, Timperley et.al and a growing number of evidence hubs, school leaders and governors still face the operational challenge of determining how long they ‘stay the course’ or let go of any intervention or innovation.

The OECD has studied the ways that 14 countries, including Australia, approached evaluation in schools. At the time of publication, this was one of the largest international studies of educational evaluation ever conducted. Key recommendations of the report included:

- “Take a comprehensive approach: All the components of assessment and evaluation – student assessment, teacher appraisal, school evaluation, school leader appraisal and education system evaluation – should form a coherent whole. This will generate synergies, avoid duplication and prevent inconsistency of objectives.
- Align evaluation and assessment with educational goals: Evaluation and assessment should align with the principles embedded in educational goals.
- Focus on improving classroom practices: To optimise the potential of evaluation and assessment to improve what is at the heart of education – student learning – policy makers should promote the regular use of evaluation and assessment results for improvements in the classroom.
- Carefully conceive the high-stakes uses of evaluation and assessment results. The use of evaluation and assessment results should avoid distortions in the education process such as teaching-to-the-test and narrowing of the curriculum.
- Build consensus: Ensure that all the stakeholders are involved early and understand the benefits.

- Place students at the centre: Students should be fully engaged with their learning and empowered to assess their progress. The development of critical thinking and social competencies should also be monitored” (2013).

In short, evaluation should be driven by student need. It is also clear that the data collected throughout an innovation must be aligned with clear goals or intended outcomes. Evaluation needs to be led by governors, systems and school leaders but owned by those with the greatest responsibility for improving student outcomes – teachers, and ultimately the students themselves.

The OECD research team noted in the country-specific reviews that Australian education has some of the larger system structures in place to measure student and school progress and achievement. However, there was “no sufficient articulation of ways for the national education agenda to generate improvements in classroom practice through the assessment and evaluation procedures which are closer to the place of learning” (2011). This gap in systemic strategy then falls to schools to resolve.

Evaluative thinking

Schools already engage in summative external reviews to determine their progress. They may use instruments like ACER’s National School Improvement Tool. They may have evaluated their current strengths and planned for change using internal and self-directed reflections including the Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) Self-Improving Schools matrix. Queensland independent schools are also required to demonstrate

their compliance with legislation and viability through the Non-state Schools Accreditation Board Cyclical Review. These are all forms of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and are usually conducted at specific points in time.

However, Bennet and Jessani (2011) describe an alternative approach to evaluation that is designed to respond to the needs of a dynamic and complex environment. Evaluative Thinking (ET) responds to the context, requires participants to challenge underlying assumptions of the context and be very specific about the intentions of the innovation and its implementation. They describe ET as “questioning, reflecting, learning, and modifying” but this cycle is conducted throughout the implementation of innovations, not only at the beginning and end. “It is a constant state-of-mind within an organisation’s culture and all its systems.”

They describe the difference between traditional M&E and ET this way, “with M&E a project is fired like a cannonball, and not until it has landed can its accuracy or effect be assessed. With ET, the project is like a guided missile, able to constantly adapt and steer to ensure maximum accuracy and impact.”

Timperley and Earl believe that “ET allows innovators (governors, teachers, leaders) to define the lessons that they want to learn, to determine the means for capturing those lessons, and to design systems to apply them in improving their performance.

Evaluation and education: measuring what matters

By going beyond the more time- and activity-bound processes of M&E, ET is learning for change” (ICSEI, 2017).

Earl and Timperley propose that evaluative thinking supports innovators to:

- “define and describe the innovation and its evolution
- identify the purpose(s) of the innovation and the expected outcomes
- frame evaluation questions
- collect and analyse evidence
- interpret evidence gathered from multiple stakeholder groups across different contexts, and share insights and findings” (ICSEI 2017).

Evaluative thinking also helps schools to become learning organisations and avoid activity traps. They state “if activity were a proxy for improvement things would be fine. Unfortunately, levels of activity hold no direct promise of improvement. In fact, there is a good chance of ending up in an ‘activity trap’ focused on doing, where the activity may be ineffective, or even counterproductive. The troubling nature of activity traps is that you don’t know when you’re in one” (Katz, Earl, Benjaafar 2009).

In their paper “Evaluative Thinking for Successful Educational Innovation” they describe ET as a systematic process that involves “pausing at different points in innovation to reflect on progress and direction, and decide whether and what evidence is needed to inform ongoing amendments, refinements or further development of the innovation”. They observe that evaluative thinking helps “develop the theory of action” and that it acts as a “platform for identifying what needs to be investigated further and the kinds of evidence that might contribute to decisions as they are being made” (2014).

To support the development and application of evaluative thinking Earl and Timperley describe decision-making points and processes in sections, represented in *Figure 1* below. These can be used by school personnel to progress through cycles of evaluative thinking.

The other feature of Earl and Timperley’s approach to evaluative thinking is the role evaluators play as critical friends to the innovators. Evaluators walk alongside the innovators, they model, coach, provoke and respond to the dynamic and iterative learning

of the team. Earl and Timperley assert that “practitioners involved in implementing the innovation usually want to know more directly about how the innovation is impacting on the day-to-day aspects of their work and likely immediate goals.

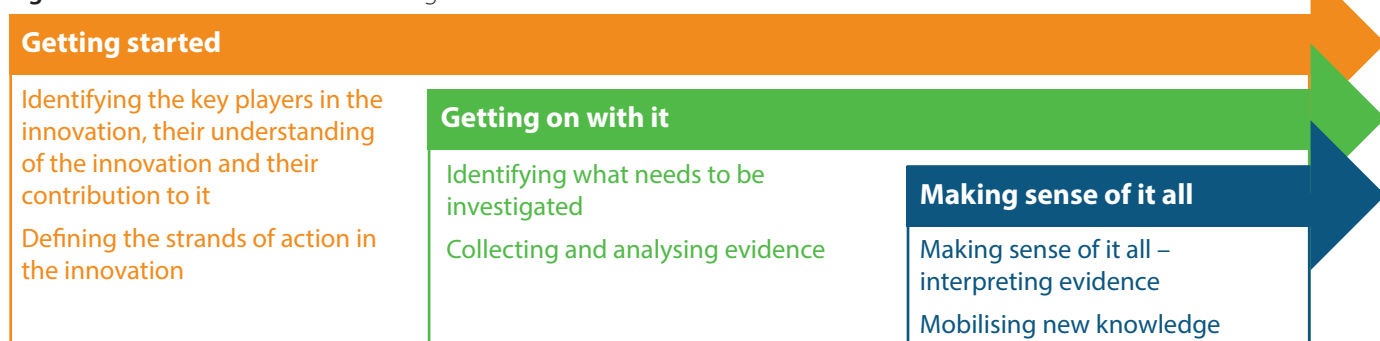
The external perspective of the evaluator often helps push thinking and challenge ‘taken for granted’ ideas held by those more closely involved” (2014).

Conclusion

Evaluation can “foster the chances of successful policy implementation, by improving communication about the long-term vision.” By communicating clearly about the intended impact and value of what is to be accomplished by reform or innovation, evaluation can become the rationale for future reform (OECD, 2013).

Evaluation can provide governors, teachers and leaders with a way to determine what practices, processes and innovations are making the greatest difference. “Coherent evaluation and assessment frameworks should aim to align student learning objectives,

Figure 1: Sections of evaluative thinking



practices in the school system, and evaluation and assessment around key learning goals, and include a range of different evaluation and assessment approaches and formats, along with opportunities for capacity building at all levels” (OECD, 2013).

Evaluative thinking is an approach that can be applied across a school to ensure the impact and purpose of innovation remain the focus of all activity. Evaluative thinking enables innovations to evolve in response to context. The new knowledge generated in the reflective cycle can be mobilised amongst those who will make the biggest difference to student outcomes.

Evaluative thinking is evidence of a school as a learning organisation. Agarwal has identified that five key “activities of a learning organisation include:

- Systematic: Insisting on data over assumptions.
- Adventurous: Willing to try different approaches.
- Confident: Of the values of productive failure instead of unproductive success.
- Open-minded: Borrowing enthusiastically from best practice.
- Dynamic: Sharing knowledge and rotating and training its people” (Bennett & Jessani, 2011).

These qualities are features of high-performing teams, where all members of the team are taking responsibility and hold each other accountable for the continuous improvement of the organisation.

A school that embeds evaluative thinking can activate those responsible for the improvement, supporting them to take ownership and assess the value of innovations that they have been directed, or have selected, to implement.

Berkholz states that there is a “common assumption that innovation can’t be measured” and that this “stems from the role that unpredictability plays in the process” (Bernholz, 2011). However, evaluative thinking is an inherently reflective process, a means of resolving the “creative tension between our current and desired levels of performance” (Bennett & Jessani, 2011, cited in Earl & Timperley, 2014).

Finally, if evaluative thinking is the framework for evaluation in a school, the leadership team (evaluators) have the opportunity to walk alongside teachers (the innovators) as they explore and resolve the creative tension associated with improving the performance of students. Alternatively, when schools engage external expertise, evaluative thinking can create a relationship between the school and the evaluator that is iterative, dynamic and focused on growth. This relationship stimulates knowledge, mobilisation and learning for all the stakeholders involved in the innovation.



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ISQ and evaluation

Since 2014, ISQ has worked closely with Professor Helen Timperley to establish evaluative thinking. At ISQ evaluative thinking guides the program delivery of Great Teachers in Independent Schools (GTIS). It has enabled ISQ to explicitly define the intent of our programs. It has also enabled us to work collaboratively with schools to actively review and assess the impact of the GTIS programs in achieving the desired intent.

The professional collaboration between ISQ staff and schools has improved the quality of the services delivered to our members. It has also encouraged schools to engage very closely with the long-term intent of the programs and review how effectively they are implementing the outcomes of their learning and development.

ISQ has also engaged Professor Timperley to look at the Self-improving Schools program to strengthen the role of the Self-improving schools’ consultant so that they can more readily support schools to evaluate their progress and support schools to link their improvement plans to student outcomes.

Schools interested in establishing evaluative frameworks to measure the impact of initiatives in place to improve teaching and learning should contact ISQ. An ISQ consultant can support your planning and design. In 2017, ISQ will launch a course to guide school leaders to establish evaluative thinking to measure the impact of educational innovation.

References and further reading

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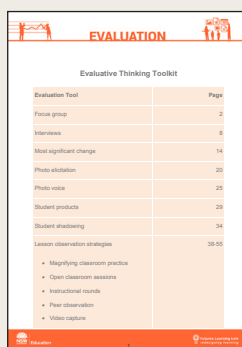
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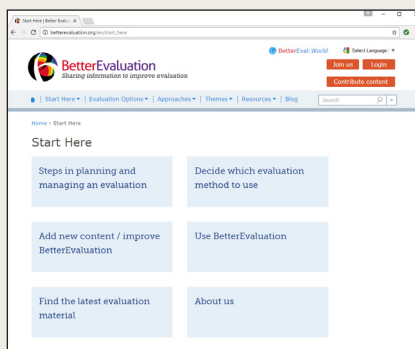
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Other useful resources



Evaluative Thinking Toolkit
<https://education.nsw.gov.au/futures-learning/rethinking-evaluation/evaluative-thinking-toolkit>



BetterEvaluation website
http://betterevaluation.org/en/start_here



Evaluating Innovation
<https://www.scribd.com/document/57548064/Evaluating-Innovation>

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