‘While spending on education is a necessary prerequisite for high-quality education, it is not sufficient to achieve high levels of outcomes. Effective use of resources is necessary to achieve good outcomes.’ That’s one conclusion from this year’s Education at a Glance report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Directorate for Education, as measured by the relationship between performance in Science in the OECD Program for International Student Assessment at age 15 and cumulative expenditure per student between six and 15 years old.

The report indicates that salary costs per student in Australia, along with New Zealand and the United Kingdom, balance above-average teaching time and relatively low class sizes. Australian salary costs per student as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita are close to the OECD average.

The report concludes that student outcomes are not necessarily linked to expenditure per student, identifying the socio-economic context, the quality of teachers, teaching methods and curriculum content as factors that may affect outcomes.

As Figure 1 from the Education at a Glance report shows, public spending on school education in Australia as a percentage of GDP in 2005 was 3.4 per cent, below the OECD average of 3.8 per cent, although when public expenditure is topped up with private expenditure, total expenditure for Australia rises to 4.1 per cent.

What’s the picture when it comes to the funding of higher education? Private funding of higher education in the OECD represents on average 27 per cent of total spending, exceeding 50 per cent in Australia, Japan and the United States, and 75 per cent in Korea.

Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2005)
From public and private sources, by level of education, source of funds and year

As the Education at a Glance report explains, labour market demand for skilled employees is generally rising faster than the supply of those holding high-level education and training qualifications, which is stimulating high demand in the higher education sector. This in turn is stimulating many OECD countries to adjust the mix of private and public funding for tertiary institutions.

‘Some countries have found new private sources, some have expanded public funding, while those doing neither increasingly find expansion and quality hard to reconcile,’ the report notes.

According to the report, ‘Many European countries have not increased public investments in their universities to the extent needed to maintain past expenditure per student levels, yet do not allow universities to charge tuition fees. As a result, their institutions’ budgetary difficulties are increasing, which may ultimately endanger the quality of the programs offered.’ Average spending per European tertiary student, for example, is now below half the average spending per US tertiary student.

‘While choices between greater public investments and a larger share of private money are difficult to make, doing neither in the face of the rising demand for more and better tertiary education seems no longer an option,’ the authors warn.

Graduation from upper secondary education is becoming the norm. The proportion of Australian secondary students who graduate from programs designed as preparation for entry into tertiary programs is, however, outstripped by the proportion who actually enter these programs because of the high proportion of international students enrolling in Australian tertiary institutions. In 2006, more than half of those at the typical age of graduation completed their first tertiary degree in Australia, while around one graduate in five previously resided in another country. Australia had the second highest graduation rate, just below 60 per cent, behind Iceland.

Rank and file

Results from the first National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 released in September show students from the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Victoria typically perform above the national average on most measures. According to ACT Minister for Education Andrew Barr, ‘The fact (that) ACT students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are at the top of 17 out of 20 categories and ahead of national averages in all these key areas of education is proof of the high standard of the ACT system.’

Northern Territory Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Education Marion Scrymgour acknowledged that while most NT students are meeting the minimum national standard in literacy and numeracy, the report shows the NT has the highest number of students performing below an acceptable level. Between 25 and 39 per cent of NT students did not meet national minimum standards. ‘There are still too many kids without basic literacy and numeracy skills,’ Scrymgour said. ‘Indigenous students at remote schools in the territory are still at a huge disadvantage compared to non-Indigenous students,’ she said.

Queensland Minister for Education Rod Welford acknowledged that literacy results for Year 3 students were a concern, but pointed out that Queensland Year 3 students are up to nine months younger and have had almost a year’s less formal schooling at the time of testing than their interstate counterparts. ‘I expect this anomaly in the early years will dissipate over time, as we start to see the benefits of an extra year of schooling – the newly-introduced Prep year,’ he said.

Tasmanian Premier and Minister for Education David Bartlett also concentrated on the early years, saying, ‘Our investment in the early years is beginning to show results with Tasmanian Year 3 students performing strongly across all areas.’

LINKS:

All change

In the wake of the Western Australian election in September, the WA National and Liberal parties have formed a minority government under the leadership of Colin Barnett. Barnett appointed Liberal Peter Collier as Minister for Education and Training. Collier was a teacher at John Curtin Senior High School from 1981 to 1983, Lesmurdie Senior High School from 1985 to 1986, Presbyterian Ladies’ College, Perth from 1987 to 1988, then Scotch College from 1990 to 2005 before entering the WA parliament.

In New South Wales, meanwhile, new Premier Nathan Rees brought back John Della Bosca, but this time as Minister for Health, while Verity Firth was given Education and Training. She becomes the seventh Minister for Education and Training in NSW in six years. Firth was a student at Artarmon Public School on the lower North Shore of Sydney and North Sydney Girls High School.

The Queensland Minister for Education and Training Rod Welford, meanwhile, announced in September that he will not contest the next state election. Federally, the new Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull dumped Tony Smith as shadow Minister for Education – he became assistant Treasury spokesman – for Christopher Pyne.