

# Spotlight on Australia's Progress On SDG 4

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MAY 2019

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Australian Coalition for Education &  
Development

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# Executive Summary

This Spotlight Report was prepared by ACED, a coalition of CSOs in Australia committed to achievement of SDG 4. The Spotlight Report aims to review the current status of SDG 4 in order to motivate a conversation about Australia's commitment to the achievement of SDG 4 both within and outside Australia.

## 1. Country and Education Context

- Population of 25.1 million<sup>1</sup>
- Education Compulsory from age 6- 16<sup>2</sup>
- 9.3% of total government expenditure is spent on education
- Funding education is a joint responsibility between the Federal Government and State and Territory Governments, with State and Territory Governments providing a majority of funding for government schools.

## 2. Rollout and Implementation

Australia takes a 'whole of government' approach to implementation of the SDGs, and has established a national Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) for this purpose. The IDC is co-chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet with a view to coordinating the implementation of the SDGs domestically and internationally. The IDC was established just prior to the release of Australia's 2018 Voluntary National Review (VNR). Importantly, Australia does not have a clear national plan for implementation of the goals. Nor does it have any specific financial commitments or regular progress reviews. The effectiveness of the IDC has been called into question in a recent Senate Inquiry into the SDGs, with some submissions noting a lack of visibility and with no obvious reporting mechanism. In line with the 'whole of government' approach, individual agencies are given responsibility for individual SDGs. The Department of Education and Training (DET) currently holds responsibility for the implementation of SDG 4, the education goal.

The Australian Government has developed a 'Data Reporting Platform', which is funded by DFAT and produced by the Department of Environment and Energy, (DEE), in close cooperation with The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research

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Organisation (CSIRO). The platform aims to provide a single point of access to data pertaining to Australia's progress on the SDGs. The ABS mapped existing data sources against selected SDG indicators in order to identify which data sources aligned well with the indicators.

There have been some efforts towards localisation of the SDGs at a sub-national level. For example, the City of Melbourne conducted a review to determine how many of its goals and plans aligned with the SDGs. However, as of yet, there is nothing comparable to the United States (US) Cities' SDG Index, which ranks the 100 most populous metropolitan areas in the US on the Sustainable Development Goals. In general, Australia could learn from other countries which are performing well against the SDGs, and 'typically have a national plan for the SDGs, clear reporting mechanisms, and the work is led by government from within the office of the head of government or state'. Germany, for example, has successfully aligned its national development strategy with the SDGs in terms of their domestic and international policy objectives.

### **3. The Role of CSOs in the SDG implementation and review process, focusing on SDG 4**

The Australian Government partnered with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), for example through DFAT providing funding for both the Australian SDGs website, Monash's 2018 SDG Summit, and the CSIRO's support for the development of SDG toolkits by each of ACFID and Collaboration for Impact. However, community organisations must be sufficiently resourced to engage with the SDGs on a significant level. Towards this end, ACFID has suggested the creation of a scheme for the provision of small grants through each government department in order to enable stakeholders to access funding for communicating the SDGs. In particular, provisions to support the active participation and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the SDGs could be made.

There is currently no formal consultation mechanism whereby CSOs may contribute in a significant and ongoing manner to SDG implementation and review, although civil society was invited to make submissions to DFAT's mid-term review of the *Strategy for Australia's Aid Investments in Education 2015-2020*. Establishing a multi-sectoral reference group consisting of members of civil society, and with the role of advising the Government on SDG implementation issues through formal consultation may help to fill this gap. An example of good practice is that of Finland<sup>3</sup>, which has established a

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) 'Australian Demographic Statistics, 2018.' Retrieved from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/D56C4A3E41586764CA2581A70015893E?Opendocument>

<sup>2</sup> Sources for evidence, which appears in later sections of this report, will be excluded from the executive summary.

<sup>3</sup> Directorate General for External Policies, European Parliament (2018) 'Europe's Approach to Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: Good Practices and the Way Forward'. Retrieved from: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/160360/DEVE%20study%20on%20EU%20SDG%20implementation%20formatted.pdf>

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Development Policy Committee including political parties, NGOs and Trade Unions for monitoring and evaluating Finnish development policy, including the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

#### **4. Brief comments on the VNR report and the role played by CSOs in its development**

In the lead-up to the 2018 VNR, consultations across different sectors in Australia were undertaken, with agencies contacting stakeholders requesting case studies, of which more than 300 were received. In 2019, the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Reference Committee tabled its report inquiring into Australia's implementation of the SDGs. The report raised the concern that the Government had not done enough to consult all stakeholders. A submission from Children and Youth with Disabilities Australia (CYDA), for example, noted the minimal mechanisms for input from people with disabilities and their organisations. Australia's VNR is really a collection of case studies of best practice programs and policies. What is conspicuously absent is any mention of indicators, target setting, or any baseline data from which to measure future progress.

#### **5. Reviewing the progress made so far on SDG 4**

As mentioned, Australia's implementation strategy has been far less formalised than some other countries such as Germany and Finland, as exemplified by the absence of a formal national policy and strategy on lifelong learning.

There are a number of critical gaps and challenges for Australia in reaching many of the SDG 4 targets.

- Australia under-invests in early childhood education, and sits behind many OECD countries in terms of the amount of free tuition it provides for pre-school aged children.
- Disadvantaged primary and high school students such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rural students and /or learners with disabilities, continue to have poorer educational outcomes than their more advantaged classmates.
  - School principals continue to report a lack of resources required for learners with disabilities,
  - The recent Closing the Gap (CTG) report shows no progress in closing the education gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, except for Year 12 school attainment. Compounding these problems is a shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. Despite repeated calls by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a greater voice in decision making, as recently as 2017, the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure added conditions to families' welfare payments if their children didn't meet school attendance requirements. Punitive policies such as these have not resulted in positive outcomes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be given a leadership role in decisions affecting their communities.

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- Australia has the largest gap between rural and city learners out of OECD countries, evidence of which can be seen in the results of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, along with the Australian PISA, and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores.
  - There is a shortage of teachers including those that teach specific subjects such as mathematics.
  - The last OECD Survey of Adult Skills (or PIAAC) which measures adult skills and competencies in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments indicated that approximately 53% of working age Australians have difficulty with numeracy skills; 46% of Australian adults have difficulty with reading skills, and 13% are classified in the lowest literacy category.
  - The issue of public versus private education funding is a common theme through many cases referred to in the report. Nationally there have been significant cuts totaling AUD \$1.9 billion over two years, while at the same time, there has been an increase in funding to private schools. A common civil society contention is that, as many studies have shown, the commercialisation of education undermines the right to education. However, marketisation of both the early education sector and the VET sector has led to inequities and declining quality. This report asserts that the increased marketisation of multiple levels of the education system is a driver of inequality in Australia, and needs to be reversed.
  - There is no national approach to the adult and community education (ACE) sector which reaches across all states and territories in urban, rural and remote communities. All governments and organisations should use adult and community education as a process to engage with the SDGs and include resourcing effective, high quality professional development that focuses on teaching and learning practice designed to improve SDG outcomes for high needs cohorts.
  - The lack of investment in public vocational education and training has led to a crisis in this sector, with significant barriers for many students to undertake skills training.
  - A further problem is the lack of a national policy on lifelong learning (LLL) as a core component of SDG 4. Such a policy would highlight the need for all Australians to learn and continue learning throughout life in order to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. A formal policy would also clearly outline economic and social goals; integrate efficiency and equity, and set out roles and responsibilities for community, business and all levels of government. It would emphasise the life-skills required and the inter-connected pathways between learning opportunities. If we are to truly 'leave no one behind', then quality educational opportunities need to be accessible at all ages and stages of life.

With regard to aid investments to support developing country partners in achieving SDG 4, Australia's

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strategy focuses on priority areas of early childhood development (SDG 4.2), equity (4.5) and skills for employment (4.4). However, some of the other SDG 4 targets receive scant attention and resources. While there is also an overarching focus on raising quality education across partners' education systems through capacity development, there is serious concern that the many are still missing out on basic and ongoing education opportunities. Further, funding for the education aid program has dwindled and there are questions over the distribution of scarcer funds, 50% of which are disbursed through Australia Awards scholarships.

## 6. SDG 4 Indicator Framework

Of the 11 global indicators for SDG 4, Australia has aligned 5 with data sources. Data sources for 4 further indicators are currently being investigated for compatibility, and 2 indicators have been deemed 'not applicable'.

## 7. Concluding comments and recommendations

Along with the absence of a national plan or strategy for implementing the SDGs, no funds have been made available specifically for the SDGs, neither have there been any specific funding commitments. The targets within SDG 4 are ambitious, and they will not be achieved without specific and significant funding commitments.

Central to the Education 2030 Agenda is that no one is to be left behind. Likewise, at the heart of SDG 4, educational opportunities are to be both inclusive and equitable. Yet, in Australia, many of the most marginalised and vulnerable learners are finding themselves at an extreme disadvantage. They are not included, and opportunities are not equitable. One of the biggest drivers of this inequity is the under-funding of public schools and the over-funding of private schools. This seems to run against the spirit of equity and inclusiveness called for by SDG 4. More than ever, it is crucial to allocate resources where and to whom they are needed the most.

A National Adult Literacy Strategy should be a key foundation of a National LLL policy; one that prioritises language, literacy and numeracy (LLN), in various contexts, including a funded workplace LLN program and a national family literacy program that is focused on socially and economically marginalised Australian communities.

Further engagement with CSOs is imperative. The Australian Coalition for Educational Development (ACED) supports recent recommendations made for the establishment of a multi-sectoral reference group to advise the Government, along with the establishment of a small grants scheme to resource community organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the purpose of engaging

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with the SDGs. In order to progress on SDG 4, the driving forces behind much of the inequality in the education system need to be addressed. Needs-based funding should be re-established, and funding restored to public schools, and significantly increased. The establishment of a new National Partnership Agreement for VET is needed. Such an Agreement should, at minimum, return Government funding to pre-market reform levels, and immediately quarantine a minimum 70% of funding to not-for-profit institutions.

Australia's approach to implementing the SDGs, along with SDG 4, could be significantly enhanced by adopting the recommendations outlined in this report. A national strategy and implementation plan, for both domestic and international development portfolios, along with clear national targets and financial commitments are essential to progress implementation of the goals in Australia and the region.

## Australian Coalition for Education & Development (ACED) Members



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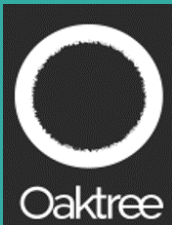
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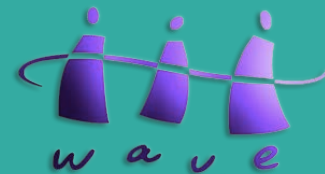
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