



# Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Midterm Review

## Australian response

Australia recognises the power of education to transform lives and is committed to meeting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 as a global benchmark for ensuring inclusive and equitable access to quality education and promoting lifelong learning. Australia meets the majority of targets under SDG 4, and we are committed to continuous improvement to exceed all targets. Reforms across early childhood education, schools and higher education systems will be implemented from 2023 to drive improvements to education access and quality. Australia will continue to prioritise increased education participation and outcomes for vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented learners, through collaboration between governments (national and states and territories), peak bodies, industry associations, teachers and students.

### Australia's education system and implementation of SDG 4

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration sets out the national vision for a world-class education system for all students. The Declaration aims to improve outcomes by promoting excellence and equity in education so that all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a key priority for Australia, to support children's education and development outcomes and parents' workforce participation. Australian targets for ECEC include a minimum of 15 hours of preschool a week for all children in the year before they start school, improving children's preparedness for school, and developing ways to measure the benefits of preschool.

In July 2018, the Australian Government introduced the Child Care Package to help give all Australian children the best start at life by supporting affordability, improving flexibility and increasing the targeting of financial assistance. Affordability was increased in two further tranches for the Child Care Subsidy, in March 2022, and July 2023. Separately, additional targeted assistance for disadvantaged communities and vulnerable children and their families is provided through Australia's *Child Care Safety Net* to address barriers to participation in child care and employment. From 2022, the new 2022-25 National Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA) came into place with a focus on improving outcomes and increasing attendance (particularly among disadvantaged and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children) and ensuring all preschool children benefit from Commonwealth funding.

Australia's targets for school education continually evolve in response to trends, challenges, opportunities and evidence-based data identifying where improvements can be made. The National

School Reform Agreement (the Agreement) operates as a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, states, and territories, that aims to facilitate collaboration, strategic reform and improved student outcomes across Australian schools. The first agreement was signed in 2013. The current Agreement (2019 – 2023) outlines national goals and targets to improve student outcomes and achieve excellence in classrooms, which are measured annually. Work is currently underway on a new Agreement, which will incorporate outcomes of a reform process to improve Australia's education system.

Australia monitors and evaluates our progress against these goals through mechanisms such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which assesses students twice each in primary and high school. NAPLAN changes introduced in 2023 set a new benchmark and a basis for identifying and targeting assistance on those most in need of support. Around two thirds of all students were meeting the higher expectations for literacy and numeracy in NAPLAN in 2023.

Access and inclusion in Higher Education has been another key education focus for Australia over the last decade. Participation in Higher Education by all equity groups has grown since 2013, including increases from 2006-2020 of 160% in Indigenous participation, 60% in students from regional and remote areas, and 81% in students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. In 2021, Bachelor or higher attainment for those aged 25–34 reached 43.5 per cent, the highest rate recorded to date. A major reform process is currently underway which is focused on further improving access to higher education among equity groups.

To respond to current and emerging skills needs, Australia recognises the need to support equitable access to lifelong learning, including formal learning such as higher education and vocational education and training, as well as informal and non-formal learning. Lifelong learning has an important role in helping disadvantaged community members, for example, through improving adult literacy and numeracy, and developing digital literacy.

## Education system challenges and opportunities

Australia prioritises initiatives that identify and address barriers to accessing education, acknowledging that some Australians continue to experience barriers to participating in quality education and lifelong learning. Students with disability and from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and Indigenous backgrounds are currently less likely to go to preschool, less likely to finish high school and less likely to go to university than other Australians.

Australia is committed to working with education providers and communities to encourage learners from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to engage in education, including boosting higher education and vocational education and training participation and outcomes. High quality education can have life-changing impacts for many students from underrepresented groups, where they may be the first in their families to complete secondary school or access tertiary studies.

The Australian Government has a particular focus on lifting the educational outcomes of our First Nations population, with all Australian governments endorsing the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Australian Government funds measures to lift First Nations student outcomes, attendance and engagement in school, with a target of increasing the proportion of First Nations people attaining year 12 or equivalent to 96 per cent by 2031. These initiatives include improving remote school infrastructure, creating partnerships between high-performing metropolitan and regional and remote schools, and scaling up primary school reading programs.



Connected Beginnings is a program that aims to increase First Nations children and families' engagement with health and ECEC, and improves access to existing early childhood, maternal and child health, and family support services to ensure children are safe, healthy, and ready to thrive at school by the age of five. The program has been a positive force in enabling communities and service providers to work collectively, shifting service delivery patterns from being siloed and reactive to collaborative in approach, and ensuring families are feeling heard, better supported and connected.

Shortages in the supply of teachers is a challenge that affects school communities across Australia, particularly in regional and remote locations and in some subject areas. Australia is addressing the issue of teacher demand, supply and retention through a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, to increase the number of people entering and remaining in the profession. This Plan prioritises improving teacher supply, strengthening initial teacher education, keeping the teachers we have, elevating the profession and better understanding future teacher workforce needs. Initiatives within the plan include awarding scholarships to high-performing school leavers to complete a teaching degree, funding pilots to explore ways to reduce teacher workload, practical and paid work experience during studies, and expanding pathways into teaching for mid-career professionals in other fields.

Australia's education system experienced significant disruption as a result of COVID-19, which was managed through the *National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care*, which aimed to ensure all schools and early childhood education centres could remain open with as little disruption as possible.

Overall, the 2023 NAPLAN results present a picture of student performance that is largely consistent with previous years and highlights the continuing educational disadvantage faced by some students. Generally, jurisdiction and equity group performance was similar in relative terms to the performance observed in previous years. The changes introduced in 2023 set a new benchmark and a basis for identifying and targeting assistance on those most in need, and the results need to be viewed in this light. Most students were meeting the higher expectations (strong or exceeding) but around 10 per cent were assessed as in need of additional support.

COVID-19 disruptions required both rapid and ongoing adjustments from students, families, educators, and education authorities, with experiences varying depending on circumstances and location. The Australian Government Department of Education is conducting a Review into the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability. The Review will provide advice to government on ways to strengthen the capability of schools to support students with disability in future emergency events, and support the recovery of school students with disability from the impacts of the pandemic.

## Moving forwards

### Improving access and quality

The Australian Government continues to work to ensure that quality education is accessible for all students. Education system reforms listed below focus on driving real and measurable improvements for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Australia is developing an Early Years Strategy to shape its vision for the future of Australia's children and their families. Recognising how critical the early years are for children's development and



continued success over their lifetime, the Strategy will aim to deliver the best possible outcomes for Australian children.

The Government has also commenced a comprehensive Productivity Commission inquiry into Australia's ECEC system to further chart a course for a universal, affordable system. The inquiry will make recommendations to support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development. The Commission will provide a final report to the Government by 30 June 2024.

The Australian Government has appointed a panel to conduct the Review into the National School Reform Agreement, and provide advice to Education Ministers on the key targets and reforms that should be tied to school funding in the next Agreement. The Review will focus on driving real and measurable improvements for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional, rural and remote Australia, students with disability, First Nations students and students from a language background other than English. The next Agreement is anticipated to take effect in 2025.

In 2022, the Australian Government commenced an *Australian Universities Accord* to drive lasting and transformative reform in Australia's higher education system. The Accord will devise recommendations and performance targets that will improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of Australian higher education, in order to achieve long term security and prosperity for the higher education sector and the nation.

### Digital transformation

Australia recognises that education transformation in the digital age – which includes developments such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and big data – needs to be just and equitable, enabling improved educational outcomes for all. Australia is committed to harnessing the benefits of new approaches to delivering education, including for students in disadvantaged communities.

While the digital transformation of education presents many opportunities for enhancing access to education, it also risks exacerbating existing inequities, and there are challenges with ensuring vulnerable and disadvantaged populations have access to the infrastructure they need. Increasingly, Australia and the international community will need to manage other challenges, including cybersecurity, digital ethics, privacy and online safety. In 2023, the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments established a taskforce to develop an evidence-based, best practice framework to guide schools in harnessing AI tools to support teaching and learning.

Lifelong learning can support all learners to become informed and active global citizens, with the skills to respond to the social, economic, environmental and technological challenges of the future. Australia is embracing innovative and flexible learning options for education delivery – such as online and hybrid learning models, and micro-credentials – as mechanisms to address current and emerging skill needs through quick and flexible options for upskilling and reskilling.

The [Regional University Study Hubs](#) program takes an innovative approach to improve access to tertiary education for regional and remote students. Regional University Study Hub facilities help students in regional and remote areas access higher education without having to leave their community through the provision of student support and campus-style facilities for students who study online.



This will include up to 20 new Hubs in regional and remote areas as well as expanding the concept to outer suburban areas of major cities, with up to 14 Suburban University Study Hubs to provide convenient wrap-around support to improve tertiary education participation and success targeted at under-represented groups.

