



Australian Government
Department of Education

Inquiry into Policy and Program Design and Implementation

Submission from the Department of Education to
the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit



Inquiry into Policy and Program Design and Implementation

Introduction

The Department of Education (the department) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee of Public Account and Audit's *Inquiry into Policy and Program Design and Implementation*. The department is responsible for the development, administration, and management of numerous government-funded programs and policies. These cover key elements of education, from early childhood and schools through to university level study.

This submission focuses on the Auditor-General Report No. 42 (2022-23) in relation to higher education programs, entitled *Access and Participation Programs for Regional and Remote Students*. It also touches on the department's overarching approach to policy and program design and implementation.

ANAO Audit – Access and Participation Programs for Regional and Remote Students

The department notes the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, including the inquiry having regard to matters contained in, or connected with, the following Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) performance audit reports within the department's remit: No.42 (2022-23) *Access and Participation Programs for Regional and Remote Students*.

The ANAO audit found the department had largely effective design and implementation of programs and initiatives to improve the access and participation of regional and remote students. However, this had been undermined by a lack of processes to assess overall package objectives and targets.

As highlighted in the report, at the time of the ANAO's audit the department had agreed to an internal audit recommendation of a similar nature. This recommendation was to develop tools to implement a structured approach for overseeing and reporting on the implementation of initiatives in response to the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine Review) at a portfolio/package level. The tools that were developed in response to the internal audit include a Performance and Data Framework and a Stakeholder Engagement Plan.

In June 2023, the department provided a response to the ANAO's performance audit. The department's response, as contained in the ANAO report, agreed with the two recommendations. The two recommendations and the actions being taken by the department are:

1. The Department of Education establish a methodology to measure the performance of programs and initiatives that contribute to access and participation for regional and remote students, and their progress in achieving Strategy outcomes.
 - The department is reviewing its Performance and Data Framework covering Naphthine Review measures to incorporate further relevant higher education programs and initiatives that improve access and participation outcomes for

regional and remote higher education students. This Framework provides a structured approach for the department's monitoring and reporting.

2. The Department of Education establish a reporting framework that:

- a. identifies data requirements (including the collection of up-to-date baseline data) at both the access and participation package and the program and initiative level for regional and remote students; and
 - b. outlines evaluation and assurance processes that consider the progress of all access and participation programs and initiatives for regional and remote students in achieving defined package level outcomes.
- The Performance and Data Framework currently identifies a range of relevant data requirements and outlines evaluation and assurance processes to consider the progress of access and participation programs and initiatives for regional and remote students in achieving defined Naphthine package level outcomes.
 - The department is currently updating the framework to meet the above recommendations. The framework will set out baseline measures and ongoing monitoring and reporting at an individual program and initiative level, as well as at a package level, for a range of higher education access and participation programs. The framework will also cover risk management, evaluation and assurance processes.

The department's Audit and Assurance Committee (AAC) monitors the implementation of the department's audit recommendations. Once the recommendations have been actioned the AAC is required to endorse the closure of the recommendations. The recommendations for the Audit are expected to be closed by the end of 2023.

The department has also been considering other findings in the report and continues to work on these areas of improvement. For example, record keeping practices. Many teams have now moved from working on drives to SharePoint (consistent with the department's record keeping policy) and have created document registers to keep track of key decisions and documents.

The department has also been sharing information with others, both internally and externally to the department, in relation to the audit and seeking to learn from other audit processes. For example, departmental staff recently met with NSW Department of Education staff regarding the *Access and Participation Programs for Regional and Remote Students* audit and the performance audit report from the NSW Auditor-General, *Regional, Rural and Remote Education*. The meeting discussed key findings and recommendations and opportunities to learn from each of the audits.

Policy and program development and administration

The department is committed to ensuring the effective, transparent, and accountable administration of programs that achieve the Government's objectives and deliver positive outcomes for Australians. This includes meeting Government obligations such as the Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and embracing better practice elements of the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines (CGRGs) that are most applicable to the individual programs we administer on behalf of the Government.

As part of being accountable and transparent, the department reports on our overall performance through a range of measures in the Annual Performance Statements included in the Annual Report each year.

The department has considered the ANAO's key messages for all Australian Government entities whilst working on new policy and program work and has implemented processes and practices to ensure that successful implementation is underpinned by effective monitoring, review, and evaluation processes. The department recognises Australian Government efforts to enhance evaluation capability and practices, in alignment with the APS Reform Plan. The department is committed to evaluating its policy and programs and introducing consistent and structured approaches. Effective monitoring collects timely and relevant information that allows progress to be tracked towards outcomes and adjustments made, as necessary. This should be designed in advance, and progress should be tracked in a deliberate and systematic manner during implementation.

Example – Universities Accord implementation

The Australian Government has committed to an Australian Universities Accord (the Accord) to drive lasting and transformative reform in Australia's higher education system. To ensure the effective, efficient, and transparent implementation of the priority actions of the Accord Panel, the department has established an Accord Implementation Branch. Responsibilities of this branch include monitoring and tracking the progress of the policies and programs being implemented in response to the Accord process, providing a mechanism for assessing and reporting on package level outcomes.

Risk management

All staff have a role in managing risk as part of their day-to-day activities. Our positive risk culture is underpinned by trust, transparency, and a no-blame approach to dealing with issues and emerging risks. Risk management is embedded in our planning, governance, and performance arrangements. Risk assessments are undertaken using a department wide risk system using risk categories and with reference to the Department's *Risk Appetite and Tolerance Statement (the Statement)*.

The Statement outlines that, in pursuit of its purpose, there will be areas where the department embraces innovation and is willing to take more risk; and there are areas where a more cautious approach is adopted.

The risk appetite of the department varies depending on activities undertaken. For example, the department has an appetite to take innovative and creative approaches to policy development and service delivery design. The department is willing to accept uncertainty and possible failure such as government not accepting a new policy option, or not proceeding to implement a service delivery improvement pilot. There is less appetite for risk in program management where legislation, government policy and frameworks exist to mandate obligations.

The department will not undertake functions where the risk level exceeds the tolerance outlined for an individual risk category. For example, when delivering an outcome, program, or activity the department will not exceed the tolerance for regulatory and legal compliance.

Departmental governance arrangements include an AAC comprising independent members, a Risk, Security and Governance Committee with an independent chair, a Project and Investment Committee that oversees key projects for the department, and ultimately the Executive Board.

Conclusion

The department recognises the importance of effective governance, monitoring, review and evaluation in policy and program design and implementation. The department seeks to ensure best practice approaches are in place to support successful implementation that leads to improved outcomes.