In April 2010, the then Federal Minister for Education, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, initiated a review of funding arrangements for schooling. The report of the review led by David Gonski AC was officially released on 20 February. The full report is available at http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/Documents/Review-of-Funding-for-Schooling-Final-Report-Dec-2011.pdf

The Gonski Funding for Schooling Report comprises 41 recommendations, 26 findings and a bid for an extra 5 billion for schooling, all intended to create a “funding system which is transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent educational outcomes for all Australian students”.

Funding for education is a hot potato that never cools off. I am confident the Gonski statistics and arguments around the dollars and cents and compensation for disadvantage will ensure the potato continues to glow.

There are, however, other elements of Gonski which provide a potential platform for addressing some enduring rural education issues.

I make this claim notwithstanding that the voice and profile of ‘rural’ in the Gonski Report is rather muted and represented more by proxies-like location, than any deep engagement with it. Disadvantage and rural, as well as remote and indigeneity which do have a higher profile, are co-joined frequently. This I think is problematic because framing rural, and remote, through the lens of disadvantage tends to deny the potential richness and the positive dimensions of them.

Making this criticism however is not to deny that many families and students in the non urban areas of Australia are acutely disadvantaged.

Returning to potentially positive aspects of Gonski for rural Australia, four have been identified and are considered briefly.

First, Gonski emphasises that “resources alone will not be sufficient to fully address Australia’s schooling challenges… the new funding arrangements must be accompanied by continued and renewed efforts to strengthen and reform Australia’s schooling system” (emphasis added, p.xix). I agree - it is quantum and how it is spent that matters.

Secondly, while acknowledging resources alone are not enough, Gonski makes a case for more funding for schooling and new ways of generating allocations and distribution- the opportunity for greater funding flexibility and partnerships with philanthropy are flagged.

Thirdly, the report signals there is still great potential for schools to be more than schools. This is widely known but has been, with a few exceptions, apparently hard to do. There are more than 2,000 schools in Australia with 100 enrolments or less. The development of funding for schools to remain open in their own right but also work in clusters to generate the benefits of scale should be a priority for post Gonski policy work.

Fourthly, Gonski acknowledges that ‘inside the school fence’, the quality of teachers and leaders matter most for student learning- “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (p.23). Also, “high-achieving and high-equity schooling systems typically invest in building quality and capability in school leaders and teachers” (p.107). Further, “excellence in teaching, in all schools and at all levels of schooling, is by far the single most important factor in achieving sustained improvements in the performance of Australia’s schooling system” (p.217).

(continued on page 4)
AWARDING contracts to run country school bus services to major metropolitan companies would constitute yet another blow to the ability of rural communities to remain economically viable, according to Flinders University academic Professor, John Halsey. Professor Halsey, who holds the Sidney Myer Chair in Rural Education and Communities, said country-based school bus service providers should receive the same consideration for subsidies and protection from market forces as the car industry or projects such as the Adelaide Oval redevelopment. He said decision makers needed to think about the wider implications of exposing rural communities to the full force of economy-of-scale processes and market forces. “In order for rural communities to survive and prosper and be the innovative places and spaces that South Australia requires, it is critical the remaining economic fabric and opportunities not be overwhelmed by metro-centric or pure competitive market decision-making,” Professor Halsey said.

In his submission to the SA Parliamentary Select Committee on School Bus Contracts, Professor Halsey said awarding school bus contracts on a purely competitive basis, which larger companies are always likely to win, ignores the importance of small businesses to enterprise in rural communities. He argued school bus service provision was an integral aspect of sustaining vibrant and productive rural communities and their loss could have major consequences. In general terms, Professor Halsey said, there are only small businesses in rural towns and communities, and because of their limited scope and diversity, they frequently rely on interconnections to be viable. He believed country bus services should be thought of in the same way as hospitals, schools, government advisory agencies and police; that is, as part of the institutional capital that drives sustainability. “Taking away the economic benefit of running school bus services from towns and communities that are already marginal could prove to be the start of a disastrous domino effect.”

According to Family First MLC, Rob Brokenshire, public submissions for the parliamentary inquiry into the school bus contract issue closed earlier this month and several dozen submissions were made. The inquiry soon will meet to take verbal evidence. “Several dozen submissions is significant, given the number of contractors done in by the re-tendering process,” Mr Brokenshire added.

**ABC SA (Renmark) Riverland Today - 21/02/2012 8:35AM Natalie Oliveri**

Oliveri says two years ago the Federal Government commissioned the biggest independent report on Australian schools since 1973. Yesterday the Gonski Report written by David Gonski from the University of NSW was released where it suggests $5b is needed for government and non-government schools to address wide gaps between well off students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. John Halsey, Professor in Rural Education and Communities, Flinders University wrote a submission to the review representing rural schools where he suggested rural schools receive a community sustainability component on the overall funding, as they need vibrant rural communities now more than ever. Halsey says in rural communities schools are centres or hubs who serve a vital function in rural communities, and urges governments that before considering closing operations or amalgamations, they consider a sustainability subsidy so schools can continue to operate and become more innovative. Halsey says the suggested $5b will certainly make a difference, but notes one statistic buried in the report shows over 20% of students who are under performing in mathematics and reading go to government schools. He says most rural schools are government schools and this downward spiral ‘concerns him greatly’. Halsey says the report makes reference to Finland where teachers are a high status profession and must all have a masters degree. Halsey says they should perhaps make entry into university tougher for those wanting to be teachers, such as using screening programs like good medicine courses use. One general trend is to start out to the bush and make your way into the city as you get better. Halsey says rural is not synonymous with disadvantage, but is distinct. Last year, Flinders University placed a number of students in the Riverland which overall went very well. He suggests different models of preparing teachers such as spending longer in the field while being mentored would be a good thing to do.
Recently, a substantial event in academia has shaken up debate about what constitutes ethical conduct in academic research and publishing. In the last few months, Dutch researchers made a version of the H5N1 bird flu virus more contagious, demonstrating that their strain was able to transmit between mammals. The researchers did this to allow for early cures to be researched before the strain mutated on its own (potentially killing millions), but the research has caused heated debate in the scientific, and governmental communities. While the U.S. National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity has asked that the research be published in a redacted form, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has recommended that the results of their studies be published in full. In accordance with the WHO recommendation (which represents the wider scientific community) the results will be published in full, but not before an extended moratorium on publication to ensure the highest safety precautions.

Another reason for the moratorium is to allow the public to be educated to the benefits of the research, a role for which educators and communication experts are uniquely placed.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that the manner in which research is communicated to the general population is critical to affecting attitudinal and behavioural change. Educators are in a unique position to communicate such information, and educational researchers are in a unique position to examine the most effective pedagogy for doing so. One example is the growing levels of holocaust denial found by a recent student research project at Harvard University (see http://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/students/pae-holocaust-denial-jun10). With the world to soon be without eyewitnesses and survivors of these horrific historical events, one must ask what the best method is to effectively educate people about them?

A second issue, is one of ethical behaviour in academic research and publishing. Recently, research journals have adopted a Dual Use Research Concern (DURC) which attempts to guard against research that may be misused. Educational researchers may not be dealing with mutated diseases or working in rooms which have a button for making the room burst into flames as bioresearchers might, but we must never forget the influence that our research can have – and must always seek to protect our participants, as well as the larger public from any reasonably foreseeable adverse consequences our research may have.

Sidney Myer Rural Lecture

**Rural Education … Shaping Leaders for the Future**

**Wednesday 28 March, 6.00—7.30pm**

Flinders in the City, 182 Victoria Square, Adelaide, Room 1, Level 1

Professor Alston’s lecture title is especially pertinent given the many issues and challenges facing rural communities today and looking to the future.

Margaret will draw upon her extensive research and publications, as well as her firsthand knowledge of rural life, to clearly set out what needs to be done to ensure that education in rural Australia (and elsewhere) is shaping leaders for the future.

Please register online at [www.flinders.edu.au/events](http://www.flinders.edu.au/events)

For further information please phone (08) 8201 7529.
Quantitative Research – Ask (correctly) and Ye Shall Receive

One of the issues in quantitative research is the need to be exact in the questions that are asked.

Imperfections in questions can frame the results one observes. Nobel Laureate and inventor of behavioural economics Daniel Kahneman gives a fascinating account of the effect of wording on people’s reported happiness. Kahneman explains for example, that people remember happiness differently to their in-the-moment experience of happiness.

For example, people report being no happier in California than in Ohio in-the-moment, but people do report remembering being happier when they were in California than when they were in Ohio. This, he argues, is because of the difference between memory and experience. (see http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory.html for the full talk)

This talk raises an important issue for quantitative research – making sure that the questions asked are correct and match the information one wishes to receive.

Unlike interviews and case studies, when a questionnaire is distributed, one cannot ask for clarifying information after it has been completed – so we must ensure that we are exact in our requests for information.

If we wish to know how long students spend in lectures, we cannot simply ask this – different people will interpret this question differently. Does the researcher mean today? This week? This month? This year? On average across all weeks? A much better question would be “On average, how many hours do you spend in lectures each week?” Specificity is the key to getting the desired information.

One of the best ways of getting the information one desires is to (where possible) ask the question in multiple ways. This way, you can be sure you are getting the results because you are tapping the right construct, and not because of interpretations (or misinterpretations) of your wording. For example if you

are interested in whether university attendance predicts performance, perhaps ask how many days a week students attend university in an average week, how many hours a week do students attend university on average, and how often students will skip a lecture on a seven point scale (1, never – 7, always).

A great book that can help with wording issues and scale development is “Conducting research in psychology: Measuring the weight of smoke” by Brett W. Pelham and Hart Blanton.

Until Next Time,
Strength in Numbers
Dr. A

Dr Aaron Drummond

(continued from page 1)

Improving schooling for children and families in rural Australia may well flow from teachers and school leaders experiencing deep and meaningful learning and living outside cities, before they take up appointments. Put another way, location - place - matters and the present way teachers and school leaders are trained undervalues it, certainly with regard to rural places.

By re-directing very modest funding from the annual schooling allocation, plus collaborating with philanthropy, final year pre-service teachers could have the choice of a fully funded semester length rural placement. Research I have done shows this would cost around $16,000 per student.

For a similar amount, current and aspiring leaders could take a purpose designed post-graduate rural leadership study program with expert leadership coaching. Data collected in 2010 from nearly 700 rural educational leaders with the Principals Australia Institute clearly shows this is needed.

The Gonski Report, like others before it and others to come, is not ‘perfect’. However, I believe there are aspects of it which do provide a platform for changing the way funding for schooling is allocated and used, to enhance opportunities and outcomes for rural students, families and communities.

Vision and Mission

- Vibrant, productive rural communities are integral to the long-term sustainability of Australia.
- It is critical that people who live and work in rural and remote Australia have access to high quality, relevant and affordable education, training and care at all ages and stages of life.
- It is essential that the people who live and work in urban contexts and provide policy advice to governments and others, and who design and manage a myriad of programs intended to benefit country people and communities, deeply understand rural.

“If the big project of the 20th century was building the modern world, then the big project of the 21st century is surely sustaining the modern world. Food security is integral to this.”

Professor John Halsey, 2012