Should we all be dancing to the Gonski beat?

Dr Kiki Tanousis is a Director of Melbourne management consulting firm Interface Innovation and CEO of Accelerus XUNO school software systems

If you ask anyone how they think education is tracking in this country, you'll often hear how things are going backwards. How the OECD metrics for this and that, show Australia sliding down the world rankings. How so? What are we doing wrong? Are there inherent problems in how we approach things here? Do we have fundamental weaknesses that we are blind to? Is it to do with our culture – or even its fragmentation, or its absence, or none or all of the above? Or is it the advice we listen to? Or the advice our policy makers procure?

At first glance, you might think that this will be another discourse on the merits or otherwise of David Gonski's recent recommendations in his *Report of the Review to Achieve Education Excellence in Australian Schools*. But no. I'm asking something a little more tricky. What advice should we follow?

Ex-Prime Minister Turnbull didn't seem to have any doubts: "A quality education is the bedrock for success throughout life... We can and must do more [and] we now have the blueprint to do it."

However, writer and teacher Gabrielle Stroud was one of the first to bemoan the report's recommendations: "Teachers already feel exhausted, burnt out and utterly unable to implement another raft of imposed changes, particularly when every other change they've endured in the past decade has seemingly done more harm than good."

When it comes to how we formulate policy, allocate funding and set educational directions or blueprints, there is no shortage of potential advisors. This is particularly true with education. Most people have had one. Many people have

provided their kids with one. Some have even taught a little. But the advisors we select have an important bearing on the advice we get – although not for the reasons you might think. It's not that they will be wrong, it's that they can only ever be right some of the time.

Different shades of right

On the face of it, it's hard to find fault in the Gonski team. Former ANZ Chairman David Gonski is an impressive figure. OK, he's a personal friend of Malcolm Turnbull – but that didn't stop Labor appointing him for Gonski 1.0. So it's hard to run a 'political appointee' argument. He has even had some teaching experience (albeit at university level). His panel of eight had a couple of accomplished school educators. There was a balanced gender mix, and some diversity in life and professional experience among members. We had four panellists from NSW (including Gonski), two from Queensland, one from SA, one from WA. None from Victoria however, which is surprising given that the state is still arguably the national front-runner. 4-0 to NSW does seem a tad harsh. But let's not get too parochial. Skills-based boards/teams/panels are, after all, more effective than representative ones. And if the chosen advisory panel has the requisite skills and perspective, well that's fine.

But here's the thing, what if we had picked an entirely different panel, and another, and another – on paper each would have looked just as good as the other. But the paper each team would deliver would likely be different every time. And each recommendation made, even if contradictory, will have been right – for some of the time. True, many recommendations will have been identical from report to report; but they would not necessarily share the same emphasis. A cornerstone idea in one version, would be a secondary idea in another.

Emphasis is everything

The Gonski review proposed three priorities, outlined 17 findings and made 23 recommendations. The panel will have sifted through hundreds of suggestions to come down to 23. Those were the ones they thought were important. Would another group have found the same 23? I doubt it. Particularly if there had been a scientist

or coder or artist or philosopher or even an accomplished comedian among them. I offer up a comedian as a form of anti-matter to establishment thinking. How about the coach of an elite team (pick your code), or even a tiger mum? That might have shaken things up a bit.

Different people and thus different panels would emphasise different things. Some would say we need ILPs (aka tailored learning plans) for everyone. Others would say condense the curriculum. Some would say start school at seven years old. Others would say start school at 10 in the morning. A few would say "get them off those damn screens". And one brave team may even venture that it's not really an issue with education at all. And we can keep going. You see, we are dealing with a complex system. Students are not all the same. Schools are not all the same. A solution for one, may be a solution for some, but it is rarely a solution for all. Every teacher knows this. And indeed the Gonski recommendations led with this idea of difference – at the student level. But here's the problem, what if we accept the premise that every school is different? Then should we really be prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution? Even worse, should we be locking ourselves in? Didn't we already try that?

Innovation Lockout

The problem is, if we doggedly stick with a 'whole of system' approach to education, we slow down our ability to review and adapt. To improve. To innovate. Locking ourselves into a single framework of thought over a period of many years – like NAPLAN – is not a very smart thing to do. Unless it's correct of course. And then it'll be OAMs all round.

But we can't escape the reality that the effects of any implemented recommendations will take years to reveal themselves. And even longer to be corrected if they're wrong. Unless a correction is convenient in an inter-party or even intra-party stoush. In other words, if righting a wrong quickly, allows a politician to poke a blunt stick into the eye of an adversary, then that's what will happen. And terms of reference will be issued for another study, this time led by son of Gonski or even Gonski's nemesis.

Wouldn't it be refreshing if our political culture would not construe a change

of mind or an admission of a mistake, as weakness. In software development we call such changes pivoting. It's a critical feature of agile. In science, it's at the heart of the way we think. We call it scientific integrity. How else would we ever move on to the next iteration or a better hypothesis?

Different schools, different tools

We need to stop looking for a Grand Solution. A blueprint. Every time we do this, we take a five-year gamble with a generation. Most, if not all, of Gonski's recommendations will be correct some of the time. But different schools thrive in different ways. Take the tailored learning plan recommendation. Absolutely 100% not a new idea, that's what teachers do intuitively, and that's what software providers like us, supply tools for. From a software perspective, whether your school is in favour or against, it's just a matter of the settings we activate on your system. In a few schools it is embraced. In others, it becomes another administrative burden and fails to get buy in from staff. Depends on the school, depends on the teachers, depends on the community, depends on a lot of things.

There are three things however that I am willing to stick my neck out over. The first is that each school will have a different path to the best version of itself. Take a one-size-fits-all approach at your peril. Secondly, if we don't reassess, change, adapt, or even accept our mistakes, we will not improve and we will never innovate. And finally, and this harks back to Gabbie Stroud. It's all about time. Time is everything. No amount of templating and organising and pontificating and prescribing and recommending will match the power of a teacher's ability to deduce and intuit what a student needs. And to do this, a teacher needs time. Time with the students, time to prepare, time to reflect, and time to learn from their peers. In my view, saving time is one of the key purposes of technology in a school. It must save you time. It must be able to adapt to your school's specific circumstances. It should be a servant not a master.

So what about the 23 recommendations in Gonski 2.0? Well, when it comes to bashing out a tune at the school disco, by all means, let Gonski play. But if the dance floor empties, fade into the next song quickly, there's no shame in pivoting.