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# **Australian public opinion about NAPLAN: Damned if you do, damned if you don't**

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# Research Brief

## What is the problem?

The National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was implemented in 2008 to assess and monitor literacy and numeracy capabilities of Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 students across all states and territories in Australia. NAPLAN has generated contentious debates about educational outcomes and school accountability issues in Australia. Criticisms surrounding NAPLAN have been widely known as reported in print media (e.g., Reid, 2020), academic book chapters (e.g., Cumming et al., 2016), journal articles (e.g., Hardy, 2014; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), trade journals (Zadkovich, 2017), and reports commissioned by various teacher unions (e.g., Canvass Strategic Opinion Research, 2013).

Dominant themes in NAPLAN's criticism are: it narrows the curriculum; its main purpose is unclear (Brady, 2013); it has negative impact on students' and teachers' wellbeing (Canvass Strategic Opinion Research, 2013); school-level performance data are available in the public domain (Cumming et al., 2018); and there has not been clear communication from the government about its intended use (McGaw et al., 2020).

In spite of detailed and widely known criticisms of NAPLAN, there has been relative lack of attention to the reasons why such criticisms have arisen and the characteristics of those who voiced negative or positive opinions about NAPLAN. Therefore, our project aimed to deliver:

1. Theoretical accounts of the mechanisms underlying the formation of the public's views and opinions about NAPLAN
2. Assessment of the perceptions and opinions of the Australian public (not teaching profession or academics) about the nature and core functions of NAPLAN
3. Identification of sub-populations of people who may feel particularly negative or positive about NAPLAN testing.

## What we did about it

Four data were analysed: two sets of primary data (listed 1 and 2 below) and additional two sets of secondary data (listed 3 and 4 below). From each source, both qualitative and quantitative information was analysed.

1. Online survey [Qualitative]: An online survey containing a question 'What is your view of NAPLAN?' was distributed to technical, administrative, and academic staff working at UNSW (N = 89). The survey link was open for about one week in June 2019.
2. Online survey [Quantitative Section]: Eleven statements (with Likert-type response categories) were created and administered to 1,328 adult residents of New South Wales (aged between 18 and 60, Mean age = 40). [Qualitative Section]: One open-ended question "Anything else you want to say about NAPLAN" was also presented to illicit free-form qualitative responses. Quota sampling was employed based on age, gender, education, income, and region.
3. 'The NAPLAN Review Final Report' (McGaw et al., 2020) was commissioned by Ministers of Education in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, and the ACT. It was written by three prominent Australian researchers. Respondents' quotes included in the Report were re-analysed for the purpose of our project.
4. 'The NAPLAN Reporting Review' (Louden, 2019) was prepared for the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) by Education Services Australia. This research was conducted by Professor William Louden and was based on the data collected from focus group interviews and a survey of school leaders (N = 29), teachers (N = 51), and parents (N = 37). We carried out secondary analysis of the direct quotes from this report.

## What we found

Our thematic analysis of the qualitative data across the four data sources has suggested 21 codes, 8 sub-themes and 3 main themes. The three main themes are aligned with what is known as Incentive, Interpretative, and Institutional Effects in the literature on policy feedback and change (e.g., Atkinson, 1995; Busemeyer, 2012; Busemeyer & Garritzmann, 2017; Jacobs & Weaver, 2015; Marshall, 1950; Pierson, 1993; Svallfors, 2012).

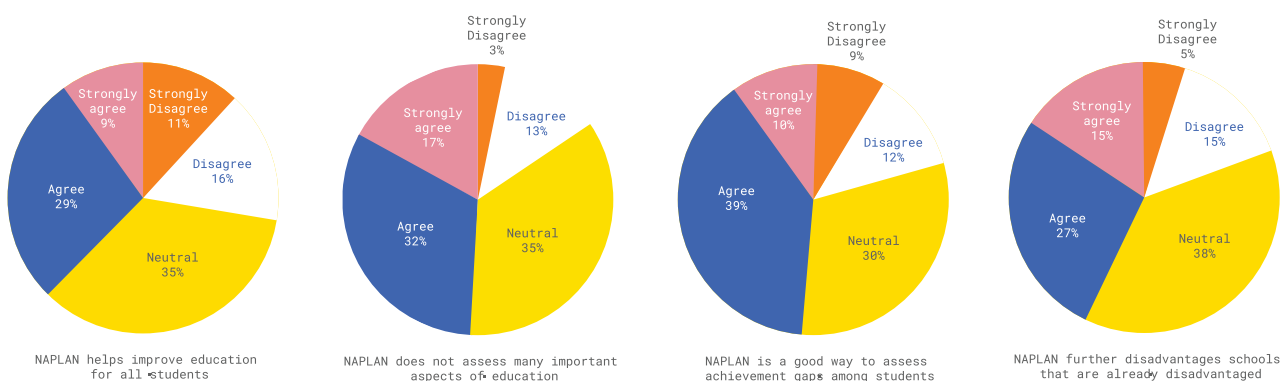
Theme	Subtheme	Code
Incentive Effect	Useful Information	Information to identify areas for improvement Information for parents NAPLAN as one of multiple datasets Motivational tool Information for school improvement
	Comparative Information	Providing in-depth data National barometer Assessing school quality
	No Benefits	Not much new information from NAPLAN No benefits to educational outcomes
Interpretative Effect	Negative Impact on Education	Distraction from real learning Emphasis on lower-order cognitive skills
	Lacking Individualised Focus	Unique differences and needs not addressed Equity issues not being addressed
	Stress & Anxiety	Stress and anxiety among children and parent
Institutional Effect	Improper Use of Test Results	School's malpractice due to performance pressure Undermining good teaching
	Improper Use by Government Authorities	Government's failure to articulate NAPLAN's main purpose Public nature of NAPLAN results Insulting and unfair nature of school comparison

Public tends to think similarly about various aspects of NAPLAN (i.e., greater than 50% agreement on most of the survey items).

While the public recognised that “There is too much emphasis on the significance of NAPLAN” (64%), they also noted that “NAPLAN is a good way to assess achievement gaps” (54%).

The public’s opinions about NAPLAN were not all negative. There were about equal proportions of positive, neutral, and negative sentiments expressed by the public.

Some of the percentages of the public’s endorsements of positive and negative aspects of NAPLAN are presented below:



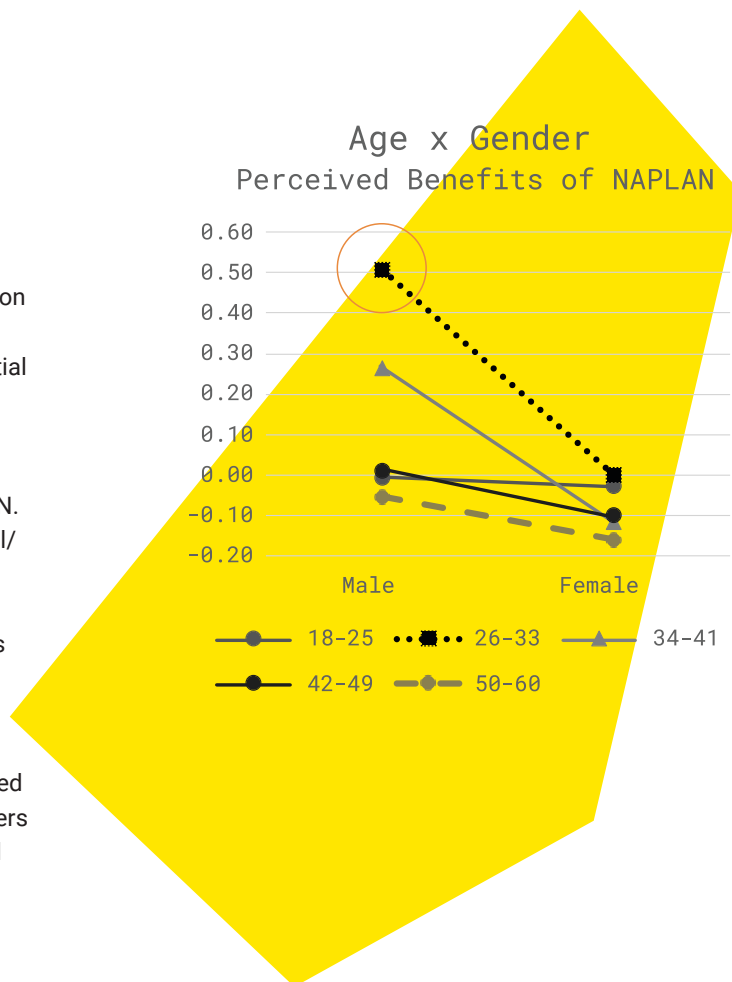
## What we found

Our quantitative data also revealed that:

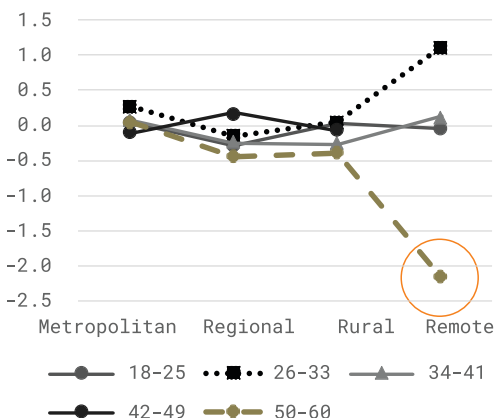
There was little variation in the negative views on NAPLAN across different demographic groups (e.g., by gender, age, educational level, residential location).

On the other hand, there were substantial differences in the positive views about NAPLAN. Males, people in the metropolitan areas, Liberal/National voters, more educated and wealthier respondents, the younger generation, and 'managers', did express stronger positive views about the benefits of NAPLAN.

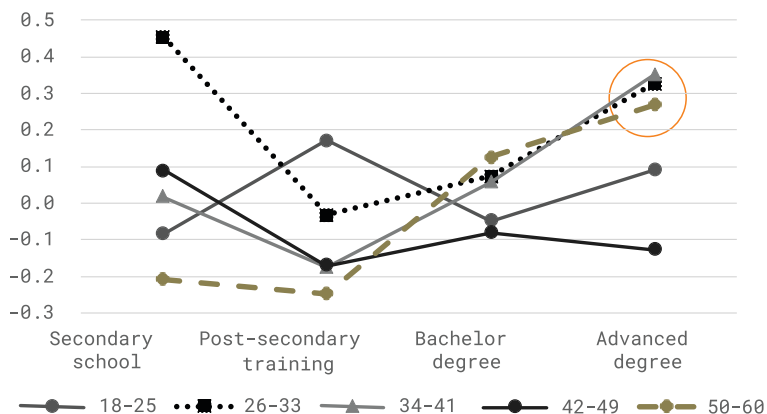
As shown in the figures below, younger (aged 26-33) males and advanced degree holders aged between 26-41 and 50-60 were strong supporters of NAPLAN. Participants aged between 50 and 60 who are living in remote areas were strong opponents of NAPLAN.



Age x Residential Areas: Perceived Benefits of NAPLAN



Age x Educational Level: Perceived Benefits of NAPLAN



## The Bottom Line

- Clearly, the opinions were not all negative.
- Benefits of NAPLAN can be used effectively in promotional campaigns about NAPLAN.
- Campaigns about NAPLAN can be targeted at specific demographic groups in the Australian population (e.g., older, remote areas).

## About the Researchers



### Jihyun Lee

Jihyun Lee is a Professor of Educational Assessment at the School of Education, UNSW-Sydney. Her specialisation is in international and national large-scale assessment (e.g., PISA and NAPLAN), 21st Century Skills assessment, and survey design. She has thus far produced 85 publications and served on several prestigious international and national committees such as PISA 2022 Questionnaire Development for the OECD and the Standard Setting Advisory Group (SSAG) for the AITSL. She teaches research methods, survey design, educational assessment, and quantitative data analysis.



### Dr Jung-Sook Lee

Dr Jung-Sook Lee is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Social Sciences, UNSW-Sydney. Her main research areas are multicultural practice, out-of-home care, child poverty, school social work, student engagement, and higher education. Her current projects include Equity in Education, Social Work in Diverse Society, and Technology-integrated family-school partnerships.



### Dr Neville John Ellis

Dr Neville John Ellis is an Honorary Lecturer at the School of Education, UNSW-Sydney. In addition to working as an academic, he has extensive experience as a classroom teacher, school leader, and education consultant in various settings both in NSW and abroad. His research interests centre around teacher professional learning, mentoring, action research, practitioner research and comparative studies investigating how different practices have been remodelled in different contexts.



### Jodi Lawton

Jodi Lawton is a Doctor of Education at the School of Education, UNSW-Sydney. For more than eighteen years Jodi has been a sessional academic, lecturer, course convenor and co-convenor at UNSW. She is enthusiastic about education and her doctorate project involves curriculum and assessment in visual arts and 21st Century Skills.



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#### For more information

Requests for further information and/or media enquiries can be directed to the contact author for the Research Brief.

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