World's best?

The Australian National University is still ranked in the top 20 of the Times Higher Education – QS World University Rankings 2009, placing 17th, down from 16th last year.

The University of Melbourne and University of Sydney are in a tussle for the honour of being Australia's second highest ranking university, both ranked 36th, Melbourne improving on last year's 38th, Sydney on last year's 37th.

Also making the top 100 universities list were: the University of Queensland, 41st, 43rd last year; Monash University, 45th, 47th last year; the University of New South Wales, 47th, 45th last year; the University of Adelaide, 81st, a big improver on last year's 106th; and the University of Western Australia, 84th, 83rd last year.

American and British institutions still dominate the top 10. Harvard University retains top spot, while the University of Cambridge moves into second place, ahead of Yale University. The rise of University College London (UCL) from seventh last year to fourth place ahead of Oxford – equal fifth with Imperial College London – is a major talking point since UCL outperformed its 800-year-old peer in terms of citations per faculty. The University of Chicago ranked seventh, eighth last year; Princeton University returned to the top 10 at eighth, 12th last year; Massachusetts Institute of Technology remained at ninth, while California Institute of Technology, fifth last year, dropped to 10th.

North American universities in the top 100 dropped from 42 in 2008 to 36 in 2009, reflecting the growing impact of Asian universities. Asian universities in the top 100 increased from 14 to 16. The University of Tokyo, at 22nd, is the highest ranked Asian university, ahead of the University of Hong Kong at 24th.

Steady as she goes

RESULTS FROM THE 2009 NAPLAN TESTS SUGGEST STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT APPEARS TO BE HOLDING STEADY, BUT NOT EVERYONE HAS CONFIDENCE IN THE RESULTS. **STEVE HOLDEN** REPORTS.

National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test results released in September show student achievement appears to be holding steady in most states and territories in terms of the national minimum standard in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy.

The NAPLAN results show little change in the percentage of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students at or above the national minimum standard from 2008 to 2009, except for students in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

According to the NAPLAN summary report, 'There may be minor fluctuations in the average NAPLAN test results from year to year when, in reality, the level of student achievement has remained essentially the same. It is only when there is a meaningful change in the results from one year to the next, or when there is a consistent trend over several years, that statements about improvement or decline in levels of achievement can be made confidently.'

Keeping in mind the difficulty in reading a consistent trend into data from 2008 and 2009, this year's test results appear to show Queensland and NT students made some gains, with 92 per cent of Year 3 Queensland students at or above the national minimum standard for reading this year, up on 87.1 per cent last year, while 89 per cent of Year 5 Queensland students were at or above the national minimum standard for reading this year, up on 86.9 per cent last year.

Similarly in the NT, 68.6 per cent of Year 3 students were at or above the national minimum standard for reading this year, up on 62.7 per cent last year, while 65.8 per cent of Year 5 NT students were at or above the national minimum standard for reading this year, up on 62.5 per cent last year.

Queensland ranked second last in 2008 while the NT ranked last.

More than 700 primary school principals, as members of the Australian Primary Principals' Association (APPA), in September called on the Commonwealth government to delay the website publication of NAPLAN test results relating to school profiles amid fears schools would be unfairly judged.

Primary principals at the APPA annual conference unanimously endorsed a motion urging the Commonwealth government to publish information on the website to explain the margin of error of NAPLAN test results that would apply when comparing student and school results.

The APPA members also called on the Commonwealth government to make good on its commitment to publish schools' levels of funding. The Commonwealth government has committed to publishing national test results in 2010, but will not make school funding information available until 2011.

According to analysis of the 2009 NAPLAN results by Associate Professor Margaret Wu of the Assessment Research Centre at the University of Melbourne, the margin of error in the NAPLAN test is too large to accurately monitor individual student progress. 'It should be made clear to parents it is only a single test, and does not reflect where their child is at,' Professor Wu concludes in *NAPLAN 2009 Results: Fact or fiction?*

'For Year 7 grammar and punctuation, Year 3 and Year 5 reading, Year 5 and Year 9 numeracy, all effect sizes are too high,' she writes. 'For Year 3 numeracy, the effect sizes are too far below zero. With seven out of 20 subject areas showing aberrant results, it is difficult to have confidence in the overall NAPLAN 2009 results.'

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Devastation in Sumatra, Samoa

Last month's earthquake in Samoa and American Samoa, which measured more than eight on the Richter scale, and the two earthquakes in the West Sumatra province of Indonesia, both measuring about seven, have destroyed schools and hospitals, cut power lines and triggered landslides.

One of the worst disasters in West Sumatra was the collapse of Gama School in Padang, the capital of West Sumatra province, where between 40 and 50 students were trapped after the three-storey building collapsed. About 55 schools affected by the earthquake were located in the Pariaman area of the province, about 50 kilometres north of Padang.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has supplied tents from Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, which had been used by students of schools devastated by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, for use by schools seriously damaged by the first earthquake.

Five of American Samoa's 29 government schools were closed as a result of tsunami damage, after the earthquake in Samoa and American Samoa. In Samoa, the welfare of 2,000 displaced children is among UNICEF's greatest concerns. Five schools were destroyed. Samoa's Ministry of Education rushed students back to schools which were undamaged by the tsunami.

Vivien Hodgins, a media and drama teacher at Mount Clear College in Ballarat, Victoria, was killed when the Samoan tsunami struck. Rebecca Martin, a teacher from Rototuna Primary School in Hamilton, New Zealand, was also killed when the Samoan tsunami struck.

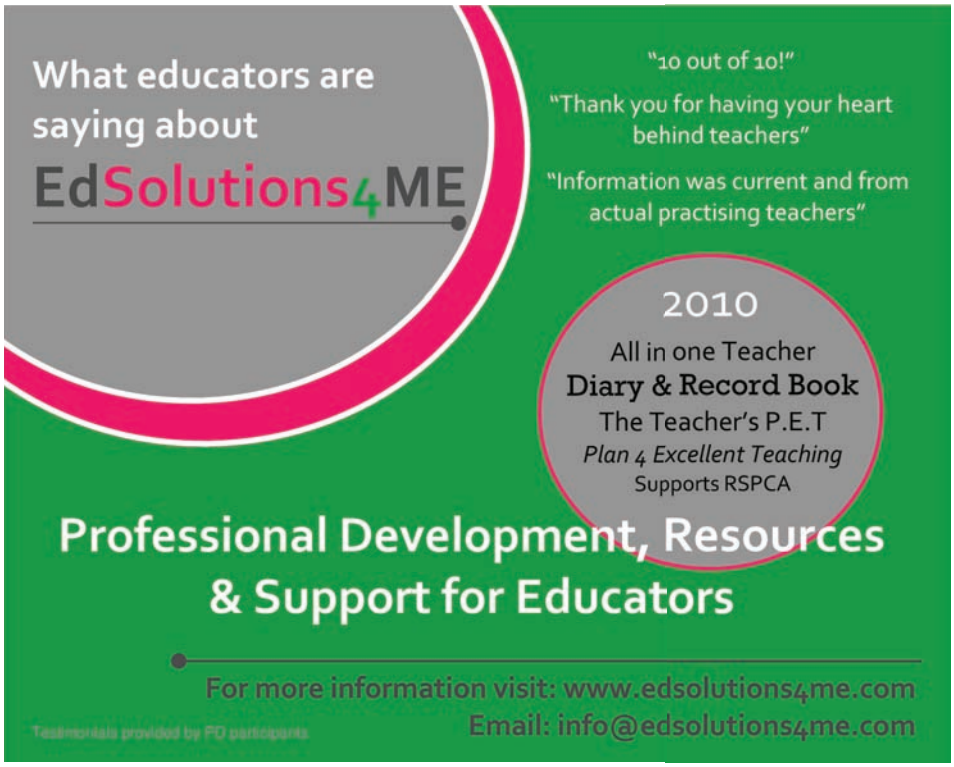
UNICEF is working alongside the Australian New Zealand governments on a coordinated recovery response.

OS students misled

International students and information technology (IT) graduates who paid for an IT course conducted by Zanok Technologies, a Melbourne-based IT service and consultancy, were misled, deceived and exploited, the Federal Court has declared. The court found Zanok and its principals, Darley Stephen and Vanitha Darley, both Indian nationals residing in Australia, had engaged in misleading and deceptive and unconscionable conduct toward the students and graduates.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) alleged that Zanok had put job advertisements on various websites including MyCareer, Seek and Gumtree, offering various IT positions, when Zanok was not offering job opportunities but rather 'IT training,' for which applicants had to pay up to $4,700.

Federal Court Justice Edmonds found that Zanok engaged in unconscionable conduct by requiring foreign IT job seekers to pay for IT training in circumstances where it knew, or ought to have known, that the job seekers were seeking paid jobs, not training. Further, Zanok knew, or should have known, that the students were typically from overseas, needed jobs to become permanent residents and only paid for the training because of Zanok's guarantee, albeit an illusory one, of paid employment at its end.

Justice Edmonds said that the conduct 'constituted more than simply taking advantage of a superior bargaining position, but involved an unconscientious exploitation of another's inability or diminished ability to conserve his or her own interests.'

ACCC chairman, Graeme Samuel, said the case sent a clear message that the ACCC would not hesitate to take action against persons who seek to take advantage of, or mislead, international students and those seeking residency in Australia about training courses or job opportunities.