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Time to reform educational assessment

Significant reform is needed in the field of educational assessment, according to a review by Professor Geoff Masters, Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

Reforming Educational Assessment: Imperatives, principles and challenges, released at an ACER conference in March, calls for a reconceptualisation of assessment and reporting in schools in order that they focus on the progress that students make, regardless of their starting points.

'Traditional expectations of assessment were based on a belief that the role of teachers was to deliver the curriculum, the role of students was to learn, and the role of assessment was to establish the extent to which students had successfully learnt what their teachers had taught,' said Professor Masters.

The review says it is common practice in schools to assess students against the expectations for their year level and to report success in meeting those expectations in terms of A to E grades. However, this traditional practice fails to recognise that students of the same age and in the same year of school are at very different points in their learning and development. Typically, the most advanced students in any school year are about six years ahead of the least advanced.

The review argues for the development of stronger connections between scientifically based understandings of learning and the assessment of learning progress. Educational assessment should be used to understand rather than to judge learning, and be an integral part of effective teaching and learning, rather than something that stands apart from, and follows, teaching and learning.

Masters says that the fundamental purpose of assessment is to establish where learners are in their learning at the time of assessment. He identifies a set of five design principles which should underpin a Learning Assessment System.

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'Instead of judging success only in terms of year level expectations, this approach recognises the progress that all students can make in their learning, and celebrates excellent progress, regardless of students' starting points.

'The reform of assessment thinking and practice has the potential to lead and drive improvements in teaching and learning. However, assessment reform is likely to be difficult in the absence of broader educational reforms. For example, assessment to establish where individuals are in their learning is largely pointless if teachers intend to deliver exactly the same content to all students in a class regardless of their current levels of achievement.

'Developing and implementing such changes in assessment thinking and practice constitute a long-term agenda – they will occur only over a number of decades,' said Professor Masters.

The review was launched at ACER's Excellence in Professional Practice Conference, *Teaching the Australian Curriculum: Excellence and innovation in the classroom*, on the Gold Coast, 17-18 March.

The Australian Education Review (AER) series is edited by ACER Senior Research Fellow Suzanne Mellor. AER number 57, *Reforming Educational Assessment: Imperatives, principles and challenges* by Geoff Masters, is available as a free download from the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au/aer. Print copies can be purchased from ACER Press, ph.1800 338 402 or email sales@acer.edu.au

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Low SES student enrolment target may be within reach

New modelling by ACER shows Australia may be closer than previously thought to achieving its target of raising the proportion of undergraduate students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to 20 per cent by 2020.

In the latest ACER *Joining the Dots* research briefing, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Daniel Edwards explores the use of a new measure of socioeconomic status (SES) that is based on students' prior residential address, rather than their address once attending university, to monitor the participation of underprivileged groups in higher education.

Using data from the 2011 Census, which includes information on residential location five years prior to the Census, Dr Edwards estimates that 18.5 per cent of domestic undergraduate university students were from low SES backgrounds.

In contrast, the current official method for measuring SES in Australian higher education, which factors in current residential address and any Centrelink benefits, estimates around 14.3 per cent of undergraduate students were from low SES backgrounds in 2010 (the most recent year for which this data is available).

Dr Edwards said a key explanation for the difference in the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds between the current and prior address calculation methods is that many students move home as they progress into university. Data from the 2011 Census show that university students were more likely to have moved in the previous five years (with 46 per cent moving) than the overall Australian population (38 per cent).

'While this exploratory measure is still a relatively blunt instrument, the findings here suggest that prior address may offer a more accurate indication of the SES background of higher education students, given that many of this cohort move house to attend university, and that the SES of their residential area once enrolled at university may not reflect their original SES background,' Dr Edwards said.

The target to raise the proportion of undergraduate students who are from a low SES background to 20 per cent by 2020 was set by the Australian Government in 2009.

While the prior address calculation method suggests Australia may be closer to meeting the target than originally thought, Dr Edwards' research shows that, despite the large growth in university enrolments in recent years, there has not been any change in the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds since the 2006 Census.

Between 2006 and 2011, growth in the overall number of students from low SES backgrounds (24.7 per cent) was at about the same rate as overall growth in the sector (25.1 per cent).

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'Despite significant recent growth in the sector overall, the Census data records no real change in low SES participation, suggesting that achieving the 20 per cent target by the end of the decade is still a big challenge,' Dr Edwards said.

Joining the Dots is a subscription-based resource provided by ACER to those with an interest in Australian higher education. Details for subscriptions are available at www.acer.edu.au/jtd or by emailing jtd@acer.edu.au

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Beyond feasibility – possible futures for learning outcomes assessment

ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Sarah Richardson reflects on the momentum behind the assessment of student learning outcomes following the completion of the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes Feasibility Study.

The Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Feasibility Study is a major achievement. Implemented between 2010 and 2012 by a consortium of organisations led by ACER, it was the first time that international testing on this scale had been undertaken in higher education. Around 23 000 students across 250 institutions in 17 countries took a test in one of 12 languages and contextual information was also collected from 5000 university teachers. A great deal has been learnt from AHELO. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is due to publish a three-volume report on findings in early 2013.

In the meantime, what are the implications for higher education institutions and governments around the world? What are the key drivers which the AHELO Feasibility Study has highlighted?

First, the rising demand from students, institutions, employers and governments to collect data on what students know and can do at the end of their degrees is now apparent. Data on learning outcomes is essential for informing improvements in teaching and learning. It is clear that the assessment of student learning outcomes is on track to become a core method of determining institutional quality into the future, balancing out the current over-reliance on research metrics.

Second, in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world the need for institutions and countries to be able to compare student learning outcomes against international benchmarks is evident. The growth in crossborder degree programs, institutional partnerships and international education feeds this demand. There are ever greater calls for assessment instruments which can be developed and implemented across countries and languages. The ability to deliver instruments online aids the realisation of this vision.

Third, the interest in collecting information on both discipline-specific and generic learning outcomes is clear. In the AHELO Feasibility Study three assessments were developed – Civil Engineering, Generic Skills and Economics. This is just a beginning. Similar assessments could easily be developed in a range of science, business, medical and engineering disciplines. Depending on demand, generic skills components could be included in disciplinary assessments or measured separately.

Fourth, the need for higher education institutions to use robust and scientifically validated assessment instrumentation is clear. It is essential that sound assessment practices are used throughout the student lifecycle – from first semester of first year to graduate assessments. Robust instruments ensure that data collected is reliable and valid, and that the students whose skills and knowledge meet the desired level are recognised for their excellence. Achieving this outcome requires the involvement of expert test developers. They can work with institutions to develop assessment frameworks and instrumentation, and train teaching staff in the techniques required.

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With these four key findings in mind, how do we move forwards? To further develop learning assessments in higher education, all that is required is the collaboration of a group of institutions within or across countries, a clear definition of purpose and remit, and the expertise to bring this to fruition. The only question remains – who is going to be first?

Dr Sarah Richardson is a Senior Research Fellow in ACER's Higher Education research program and managed the AHELO Feasibility Study.

Further information about AHELO is available from www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo and www.acer.edu.au/highereducation

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Outcomes assessment feasible in Australia

Following the implementation of the engineering component of the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes Feasibility Study in Australia, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Daniel Edwards reports on the successes and lessons learned.

Australia's participation in the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Feasibility Study has resulted in a number of valuable lessons. Importantly, it has shown that the Australian higher education sector is equipped to participate in this type of international study, with implementation running smoothly. Eight Australian universities took part in the international study's Civil Engineering Strand assessment in 2012.

The AHELO Feasibility Study has been vital in helping to develop processes and explore the practicalities of implementing online-based assessments that offer institutions the ability to explore their outcomes in comparison to those from a vast range of universities across the world. In achieving this, Australia is now well placed to be at the forefront of future initiatives that move assessment of learning outcomes beyond a study of practical feasibility and into an important tool for improving learning and teaching.

AHELO has also proven successful in the sense that students reported not having been exposed previously to the type of applied, integrated problems mirroring their future work that were incorporated into the 90-minute AHELO assessment. Examples of typical feedback from Australian participants include: 'It made me think and understand that the knowledge I learned from university is being applied in the real world' and, 'The tasks make you consider a real project – I may meet the same problems in my future career. It was challenging for me'.

In practical terms, attracting student participants in Australia was a major challenge faced by most universities involved in the voluntary assessment. Across all eight institutions, the total participation rate for students was low, at 21 per cent. However, the implementation of the Feasibility Study provided insight into successful models that could be widely incorporated by universities to improve participation in the future.

For example, one Australian university achieved a participation rate of 98 per cent by incorporating the assessment as part of a unit of study. Following the assessment, students were involved in discussions to reflect on their assessment experience and the relationship between their coursework, the skills they expected to employ in the workforce following graduation and professional responsibility related to assurance of educational and practice standards.

From eight universities participating in Australia, nearly 200 students took part in the assessment and almost 100 teaching staff completed the AHELO faculty questionnaire. While results for most institutions are not necessarily representative of the full student cohort, the collection of this data offers insight into the potential use of such information if a full study of this nature is implemented in future.

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Australia has further benefited from this project in an international sense. Cooperation between engineering experts from various countries in developing the assessment has provided an excellent opportunity to strengthen international bonds. Among the researchers involved in the study, the project has required working alongside international colleagues and learning from implementation models and analysis methods employed in the 17 countries participating in the study.

With an all important 'trial run' completed, the Australian higher education sector can now be considered one of the pioneers in the international assessment of learning outcomes.

Dr Daniel Edwards is a Principal Research Fellow in ACER's Higher Education research program and was the Australian National Project Manager for AHELO.

Further information about AHELO is available from www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo and www.acer.edu.au/highereducation

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ACER Update

Vocational and workplace education and training conference

The second National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference, addressing the theme, 'Building on evidence to improve skills,' brings together evidence-based research with industry and training perspectives in order to share and discuss issues around the assessment of language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) and implications for effective vocational and workplace education and training (VET).

Speakers at the conference include researchers, managers and coordinators with local and international expertise in LLN skills and adult learning, from industry and the VET sector, along with policy makers from industry, industry skills councils and government. Keynote presentations will be delivered by:

- Robin Shreeve, CEO, Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency;
- Pam Christie, Managing Director, TAFE NSW; and
- Dr John Mitchell, Managing Director, JMA Analytics.

The conference takes place at Ultimo College, Sydney Institute, on 9 and 10 May 2013. Further information is available from www.acer.edu.au/nallnac

Schools First award applications open

Applications for the 2013 *NAB Schools First* awards are now open. This year \$2 million in funding will be shared between the winners of 25 Impact Awards, 55 Seed Funding Awards, 10 Student Awards and the state and national winners.

In 2013, *NAB Schools First* is introducing key themes which encapsulate the ways in which school-community partnerships are providing students with resources, knowledge and expertise to face the challenges of the 21st century. These themes are based on areas that schools around Australia are already engaged in within their communities and address a variety of student needs, including: living sustainably; being active and well; caring for your community; embracing diversity; Asia ready; work ready; and entrepreneurial spirit.

NAB Schools First is a strong partnership between NAB, ACER and the Foundation for Young Australians. Operating since 2009, *NAB Schools First* has awarded \$18 million to 440 schools for their work in building school-community partnerships. To find out more and to download application forms, awards criteria, guidelines, and Terms and Conditions visit www.schoolsfirst.edu.au

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Principal for a Day

Principal for a Day is a collaboration between schools and their communities that aims to increase and strengthen relationships, based on knowledge and understanding, between the private sector and education. Victoria's *Principal for a Day* event takes place this year on Wednesday 14 August. The program is a joint partnership between ACER and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and has been running in Victoria since 2001. Schools and community or business leaders interested in participating in the 2013 event can obtain more information from www.acer.edu.au/pfad or by contacting Ms Viv Acker on 03 9277 5617 or email pfad@acer.edu.au

Research Developments

ACER last year determined to replace the print edition of *Research Developments*, after 14 years, with a free, online-only magazine, coming in May. [Subscribe to Research Developments](#) and get the latest school education news direct to your inbox.

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