Welcome to ACER’s Indigenous Education Update – a window into the work that we undertake in research and development in Indigenous education.

In this issue we share insights from a shared conversation between ACER and delegates from The Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, which took place at ACER earlier in the year. Participants discussed common issues about Indigenous learners.

We also celebrate the awarding of an Advance Queensland Scholarship to Troy Meston. The scholarship will allow Troy to undertake his PhD to investigate the placement of specific metric devices for Indigenous students.

Dr Daniel Edwards, ACER’s Research Director in Tertiary Education, discusses the latest research about tracking Indigenous students through the higher education system and university completions. Tony Dreise shares his insights into Indigenous students, NAPLAN, and learner growth and development.

This edition also takes a look at a resource for improving teaching and learning in Indigenous education, revisits research that focuses on Indigenous student absenteeism and reasons for non-attendance, and presents recent activity on Learning Ground, a portal of evidence-based research about Indigenous education.

We also profile Jacynta Krakouer, one of ACER’s Indigenous Graduate Research Fellows, located in our Melbourne office. I’m sure you’ll agree that Jacynta’s story is empowering.

We look forward to keeping you up to date with our work to improve Indigenous learning and research.

Gina Milgate
Research Fellow, Indigenous Education

To learn more about ACER’s Indigenous Education services, visit www.acer.edu.au/indigenous
ACER research to track students through the higher education system – from commencement to completion – is informing retention policies and practices for at-risk groups at the national and institutional levels.

The *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* report found that university students from disadvantaged groups have a lower completion rate than the national average.

Funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) at Curtin University, the research aims to provide insight for universities to better support their students through their higher education, and recognise the range of pathways taken to get there.

The report found that of the Australian students who commenced a bachelor degree in 2005, 73.6 per cent had completed their degree by 2013. For students from a low socioeconomic background, the completion rate over the same period was 68.9 per cent.

Dr Daniel Edwards, ACER’s Research Director in Tertiary Education, said the findings showed an even larger difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

‘The university completion rate of Indigenous students was just 46.7 per cent, and more than one in five Indigenous students in the 2005 cohort dropped out of university before their second year,’ Dr Edwards said.

‘The research found that certain enrolment characteristics – such as being a part-time student, older, from a low socioeconomic background or from regional or remote areas – were also related to lower completion rates.’

Dr Edwards and his team used data from the Higher Education Student Collection, and a cohort-tracking approach developed by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, to explore the effect on completion for students belonging to two or more of these equity and at-risk groups.

‘The findings show substantial overlap in membership of these groups. For example, an Indigenous student is more likely to be from a low socioeconomic background than a non-Indigenous student,’ Dr Edwards said.

‘This information is extremely important because it provides a good foundation for more nuanced research into specific groups of students and their pathways through the system.’

‘In particular, more detailed analysis of the pathways and outcomes for Indigenous students using the methods developed in this research would be hugely beneficial,’ Dr Edwards said.

‘However, there are a number of practical, legal and ethical barriers to be negotiated for developing more detailed analyses based on smaller and underrepresented populations such as Indigenous students.’
The results show that among students considering dropping out, disadvantaged students tended to cite financial matters, caring responsibilities and issues relating to ‘getting by’ as reasons that might influence dropping out, while more advantaged students were more likely to have reasons relating to choices that they had control over such as wanting to ‘change direction’.

Dr Edwards said he hoped the research would help raise awareness of the higher education divide, and encourage stakeholders, government and researchers to work together to build an evidence base for identifying issues and developing policy solutions.

‘More research is certainly needed to strengthen support for Indigenous students to complete their higher education,’ Dr Edwards said.

The full report, Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?, is available from: <http://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/43/>
The 2015 NAPLAN report released late last year provides encouraging signs in Indigenous education, but also tells a familiar story of prevailing inequity and sizeable gaps.

On the down side, at least 18 per cent of Indigenous students in Year 3 failed to reach the national minimum standard across reading, persuasive writing, language conventions and numeracy, compared with less than six per cent of non-Indigenous students in Australia.

In the Northern Territory (NT), 61 per cent of Indigenous students in Year 3 achieved below the national minimum standard in spelling, grammar and punctuation, while 51 per cent achieved below the national minimum standard in numeracy.

In Year 7, across all achievement domains and for all jurisdictions, the average score for Indigenous students is substantially below the average for their non-Indigenous peers – from 66 score points in reading and numeracy to 88 score points in persuasive writing.

Most concerning, there has been no change in the average score for reading for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Year 9 reading from 2008 to 2015. This means Indigenous Year 9 students in Australia are about 65 score points behind their non-Indigenous peers in reading.

But there is an upside, and the results point to some encouraging gains by Indigenous students. At a national level, the Year 5 to 7 numeracy gains from 2008 to 2015 for Indigenous students were greater than those for non-Indigenous students. Similarly, Year 7 to Year 9 reading gains were greater for Indigenous students.

In the NT, Indigenous students achieved their best result in Year 5 numeracy, with 46 per cent achieving a score at or above the national minimum standard. There has also been a 17 per cent increase in the average Year 9 numeracy achievement for Indigenous students from 2008 to 2015.

In many respects, the results confirm many things we already know:

- educational disadvantage is greatest in remote communities
- parents through their educational and occupational levels have a significant bearing on the likelihood of their child succeeding academically, and
- Indigenous children start solidly in the early years of schooling, but gaps generally widen the further they climb the education ladder, a problem that causes but also results from lower levels of school attendance and participation.

NAPLAN is an important measure of student academic progress across Australia, enabling educators and policymakers to see how well schools and education policies are working. But it has its limitations. Most obviously, it is limited to testing reading, writing and numeracy in only four of 13 years of formal schooling.

We know from other standardised testing programs such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), however, that Indigenous 15-year-olds can be two-and-a-half years behind their non-Indigenous peers in reading, maths and science.

Formal and standardised testing like PISA and NAPLAN only provides a glimpse of individual children’s growth and development. It does not measure how children are progressing psychologically, socially or physiologically, nor culturally. It tells us little about their social and emotional wellbeing, physical development, moral and ethical growth, sense of identity, creativity, positive relationships and enterprising behaviours. It also doesn’t tell us whether children are happy, confident, resilient, optimistic or socially connected.

A broader range of assessment programs are required to ensure that Indigenous and other children are progressing and improving daily, weekly, monthly and annually.
It is only through more holistic measures of child wellbeing and growth that Australia will gain a firmer handle on where resources for schools and other child services are most needed – to meet the demands of schools in terms of quality teaching, school leadership, curriculum delivery and Indigenous teachers, but also to meet the needs of the ‘whole child’ through literacy and numeracy tutors, paediatricians, speech pathologists, counsellors, psychologists, life coaches and Elders-in-Residence.

NAPLAN 2015 once again shows that bridging the educational gap remains an unfinished business in Australia and that ‘business as usual’ will not be enough.

Further information about the 2015 NAPLAN report is published on the National Assessment Program website of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority at <www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports.html>.
Learning and teaching in ATSI education

Learning and Teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, 3rd edition, helps pre-service teachers prepare themselves for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in urban, remote and rural primary and secondary schools. It also prepares teachers to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their teaching.

Written by Neil Harrison (Macquarie University) and Juanita Sellwood (James Cook University), Learning and Teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education balances educational theory with practical teaching strategies. It is full of case studies, examples and a range of voices and personal stories from students, pre-service teachers and Indigenous community members to convey the richness and diversity of Australian classrooms.

The book’s central tenet is ‘keep things local’, as it posits that working closely with the local community is absolutely crucial to successful teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

ACER’s Gina Milgate contributes a new chapter on schools developing partnerships with the community, while David Rose (University of Sydney) and Peter Merrotsy (University of Western Australia) also contribute their expertise.

Published in June 2016, the latest edition of Learning and Teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education also includes new chapters on the Creative Arts and Science Education for secondary schools, racism in schools, and the Stolen Generation, as well as a new section on the role of first language in learning.

Learning and Teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education is available at ACER Bookshops and all good booksellers.

Learning Ground is an Indigenous education research database, created and maintained by staff of ACER’s Cunningham Library.

Learning Ground spans early childhood to post-school education and adult learning, and encompasses areas such as cultural diversity, parent and community engagement, wellbeing, identity and oral language. With over 9100 searchable books, articles, conference papers and reports on Indigenous education from publishers in Australia and overseas, Learning Ground is an ideal first stop for policy makers, educators and graduate students. Furthermore, Learning Ground is an ideal place for scholars to disseminate their work to the national and international Indigenous education community.

Access to Learning Ground is free via <www.acer.edu.au/learningground>. New additions to the database can be followed via <twitter.com/LearningGround>.
Recent additions


Abstract: Experienced educator Jenni Connor worked with Geraldine Atkinson, a Koorie educational leader, to produce this resource for early childhood educators. The DVD includes 13 short films from The Dreaming, Aboriginal Nations’ award-winning animated series. The book records the experiences of several diverse services using The Dreaming films to introduce young children to a range of concepts: explaining the seasons, life cycles, the importance of rain and responsibility for the environment; appreciating diversity in appearance, language and culture; exploring emotional concepts such as jealousy, fairness and the value of sharing; encouraging communication, cooperation and teamwork; and investigating these ideas through music, movement, art and computer design. The Dreaming stories are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ cultural heritage. As the world’s longest continuous record of historic events and spirituality, they provide valuable wisdom for all people. [Author abstract]


Abstract: The growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in Australian higher education from 1959 to the present is notable statistically, but below population parity. Distinct patterns in government policy-making and programme development, inconsistent funding and political influences, together with Indigenous representation during the last 50 years have shaped the higher education participation of Australia’s Indigenous populations. In this article, the authors identify a constant ideological flux between welfare, equity and economic priorities in successive Australian government approaches impacting on equal opportunities for Indigenous Australians in higher education. Maintaining and increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education requires a continued focus on targets for higher education enrolments, governance and working with Indigenous educators. [Author abstract]


Abstract: Indigenous Australians have long been advocating for recognition of their languages, cultures and identities. They have sought the inclusion of their languages in schools to revitalise and maintain languages and cultural knowledge, and to take an active role in the education of their children. This paper provides an overview of Indigenous language programs and activities in education and looks to future directions and innovations that may strengthen languages in education, and in turn Australian languages. It argues that policy and practice for Indigenous language education interacts with policy and discourse for Indigenous languages, education outcomes and Indigenous policy more broadly. It identifies strengths and challenges for Indigenous languages, and examines national legislative frameworks, which would support Australia’s languages into the future, a goal Australia has set itself. [Author abstract, ed]
The report, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*, written by ACER researchers the late Dr Nola Purdie and Dr Sarah Buckley, was the first Issues Paper for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. The paper explored and reviewed key national and international studies to highlight the issues in analysing Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance and retention.

Dr Purdie and Dr Buckley found there was a scarcity of literature backed by credible evidence about attendance and retention strategies that work for Indigenous students. The report found there was some consensus among the literature. The literature does agree that a significant gap exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance rates. However, due to the different ways that student attendance and retention are recorded in the different states and territories, there is insufficient information to show if these gaps have increased or decreased over time.

There is also consensus that non-attendance and non-completion of school causes harm, and that it is important to implement policy and practice to minimise this harm.

According to the paper, most harm is to the non-attenders themselves; however, there can also be an adverse effect on:

- teachers who become demoralised
- attending students who receive less attention when non-attendees re-enter the classroom and require extra help
- jurisdiction personnel who face the increased costs and time related to dealing with the consequences of non-attendance, and
- families and communities that are stigmatised when their children do not attend school.

The reasons for non-attendance and non-completion of school are complex and contextual, the paper found. National and international literature commonly cites four contributing factors to non-attendance:

1. the individual
2. the family
3. the community, and
4. the school.

These factors apply to the non-attendance of all students – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – and address the underlying causes of student absenteeism.

‘For instance, students are unlikely to be able to fully participate and engage in education if they face a complex set of circumstances that result in disadvantage across a range of life experiences,’ the paper states.

A positive school environment plays a significant role in determining the extent to which students participate and engage in schooling.

Researchers have emphasised the link between students’ perceptions of school and their motivation, achievement and behaviour,’ the paper states.

‘Students who feel connected with school are more motivated to attend and engage. This enables learning and academic accomplishment to occur.’

A particular school-based issue of importance is teacher quality. According to the paper, good teacher–student relationships are fundamental to a positive learning experience and teachers must be aware of and respect the cultural heritage of their Indigenous students. The curriculum must also reflect a valuing of Indigenous history and the communicative styles that are part of Indigenous cultures.

The paper found that some programs and strategies that have been implemented take account of the full range of factors implicated in the participation and engagement of Indigenous students in school. However, other programs focus on just one or a small number of the factors.

Ultimately, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students* recommends:

- more large-scale research be undertaken
- future research must adequately reflect the experiences, cultures and history of Indigenous peoples and communities
Revisiting the research

- interagency partnerships must go beyond the educational arena, and
- programs and strategies must incorporate longitudinal monitoring and evaluation to track progress and confirm that programs are working.

Find the full report, School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students, at <http://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous_education/45/>
Jacynta Krakouer
Indigenous Graduate Research Fellow

Jacynta Krakouer, from the Noongar nation, a large mob from the southern region of Western Australia, grew up in a sports-oriented family in Melbourne where her father played AFL in the 1980s. An Indigenous Graduate Research Fellow at ACER, she says research and education are crucial to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Jacynta has a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Social Work from the University of Melbourne, and she is currently completing her Master of Social Policy.

After completing her Master of Social Work, Jacynta began working as a social worker, predominantly in the area of child, youth and family welfare with not-for-profit organisations. She worked with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in this sector, but spent the majority of her time working with Aboriginal children in the foster care system.

Jacynta was also employed in the Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) sector as both an AOD counsellor and a Koori Liaison Officer. This work included counselling with voluntary, court-ordered and court-referred clients, as well as counselling with clients in prison.

Jacynta joined ACER’s Indigenous Graduate Program in May 2015 after becoming discouraged with working in a frontline position in social work.

‘I began to get frustrated at the limited amount of positive change you can effect for Aboriginal people while working “on the ground”,’ Jacynta says.

‘Consequently, I commenced studying a Master of Social Policy so that I could influence Aboriginal policy change “from above”.

‘Before I had even completed my social policy degree, I landed my dream job in educational research with ACER, a position that enables me to influence educational policy and practice, as well as contribute to positive educational change for Aboriginal people.’

Jacynta says she was inspired to work in the education sector because of her own positive experiences with education through receiving a scholarship to attend a private school for Years 9 through 12.

‘Experiencing a high-quality education subsequently enabled me to gain entry to the University of Melbourne after the completion of Year 12,’ Jacynta says. ‘When I completed my Bachelor degree in 2007, I was the first person in my entire family to graduate from university, extended family included.

‘Through education, I have been able to challenge Aboriginal stereotypes and work towards improving Aboriginal wellbeing, which is an empowering feeling.’

Jacynta believes research and education are crucial means to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and enabling Aboriginal voices to be heard.

‘I thoroughly enjoy being able to advocate for necessary changes to Aboriginal education policy and practice as part of my work with ACER.

‘Effecting change in Indigenous early childhood education is a critical component for moving forward. Given the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage often experienced by Aboriginal people, ensuring that future generations have the best start to life is key.’

Jacynta says the most challenging aspect of her role is not being able to undertake all of the research endeavours that she would like to.

‘I see a need for research to be undertaken into so many different aspects of Aboriginal education, but of course, this is not possible given the practical realities of research work,’ Jacynta says.

‘I look forward to a long career in research where I am able to take part in numerous research projects regarding Aboriginal education.’
Jacynta has been involved in a range of work since joining ACER in 2015, including:

- macro-analysis of ACER Cunningham Library’s Indigenous education research database, Learning Ground
- an original study exploring the needs of teachers of the deaf
- a major literature review of a Centre for Science of Learning@ACER project, which aims to determine how Indigenous students learn from a neurological standpoint
- a major literature review relating to the current context and discourse surrounding Indigenous early childhood education, school readiness and transition programs to primary school
- a major literature review exploring cultural awareness in the vocational education and training sector, and
- articles for ACER’s Research Developments and Teacher magazine.
ACER’s Troy Meston awarded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander PhD Scholarship

In January 2016, ACER Graduate Research Fellow Troy Meston was awarded an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander PhD scholarship as part of the Queensland Government’s Advance Queensland agenda, which involves a $180 million dollar investment over four years.

It is noted on the Advance QLD website that:

‘Advance Queensland is a comprehensive suite of programs designed to create the knowledge-based jobs of the future, driving innovation, positioning Queensland as a place where entrepreneurs, industry, universities and government collaborate to turn great ideas into commercial products and businesses that create jobs.’

As part of this initiative, Troy was awarded $120 000 over three years to investigate the placement of specific metric devices for Indigenous students.

The focus of his research looks to integrate stealth assessment mechanisms inside a framework that is culturally contextual and more in line with the diversity found across the breadth of Indigenous Australia.

Key to this work is the science of learning lens, which uses neuroscience, cognitive psychology and the interface with educational research to accurately situate interventions that cater holistically to the Indigenous student. According to Advance Queensland, the initiative is designed to reinvigorate science and innovation to help attract and retain world-class scientific and entrepreneurial talent. Key to this funding stimulus is creating the environment where collaboration between industry and research bodies successfully translates ideas and research into commercial outcomes, new and growing business, and jobs.

Key to this strategic positioning is the role of ACER in working as an industry leader to facilitate the intentions and potential outcomes of this research initiative in partnership with The University of Queensland.

Troy’s application was the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander PhD award given and at the announcement, held at Parliament House, Troy got the opportunity to meet Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk and Minister for Science and Innovation the Hon. Leeanne Enoch, an Aboriginal woman from Stradbroke Island.

As part of this initiative, Troy was awarded $120 000 over three years to investigate the placement of specific metric devices for Indigenous students.
Indian delegation visits ACER

In January, ACER welcomed and hosted a delegation from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.

The delegation included the Minister of Tribal Affairs, his staff and representatives from IPE Global.

The objective of this Ministry is to provide more focused approach on the integrated socioeconomic development of the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the most underprivileged of the Indian Society, in a coordinated and planned manner.

The functions of the Ministry include:

- tribal welfare planning
- policy formulation
- research and training
- tribal development, including scholarships to STs, and
- promotion of voluntary efforts in development of STs and Administrative Ministry with respect to matters concerning Scheduled Areas.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs is the Nodal Ministry for overall policy, planning and coordination of programs of development for STs.

The purpose of the Ministry’s visit to Australia was to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, and share common issues and solutions.

ACER Research Fellow Gina Milgate and Research Director Kathryn Moyle gave a presentation about Indigenous education in Australia and the work that ACER has undertaken in Indigenous research, education and development over the past decade.

The delegation shared mutual contemporary strategies and challenges about Indigenous education, such as:

- teacher training
- residential and boarding schools
- Mother tongue
- virtual classrooms
- attendance
- engagement
- community partnerships, and
- leadership.
Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is an independent organisation. ACER’s mission is to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning.

ACER is involved in the collection, analysis, interpretation and use of reliable information to assist educational decision-makers – from individual teachers to system leaders and policymakers – in two ways: to help them help learners by identifying educational progress and challenges; and to help them identify and implement effective policies and practices on the basis of good evidence.

ACER was established in 1930 and has since built a strong reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policymakers and professional practitioners. As an independent organisation, ACER receives no direct financial support and generates its entire income through contracted research and development projects, and through products and services that it develops and distributes.

As an international leader in educational research, ACER is committed to improving learning through the Centre for Global Education Monitoring, the Centre for Assessment Reform and Innovation, and the Centre for Education Policy and Practice.

ACER has experienced significant growth in recent years and now has more than 380 staff located in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Dubai, Jakarta, London, New Delhi, Perth and Sydney. ACER works with schools, education departments, ministries of education, further and higher education institutions, donor organisations, non-government organisation, industry and other types of organisations around the world.

**ACER’s commitment to Indigenous education**

ACER is committed to improving learning and has identified the improvement of outcomes for Indigenous learners as an organisational priority.

ACER recognises the importance of respecting Indigenous peoples and their cultures in its work in Indigenous education. ACER understands that this is an important part of developing a culturally conscious workplace for its employees.