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Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

An evaluation of the national Sporting Chance Program has identified a number of critical success factors associated with the program that have contributed to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Sporting Chance Program uses sport and recreation as a 'hook' to encourage young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to engage with formal schooling. The program offers two approaches: school-based Sports Academies and Education Engagement Strategies (EES). In 2011 there were around 11 000 primary and secondary school students involved in the program.

The Academies and EES projects are delivered by project providers, such as the Australian Football League, Clontarf Foundation, Blueearth Institute and Country Rugby League NSW. In late 2010 there were 22 providers operating 54 Academies and five EES projects.

ACER was commissioned to see if the program was achieving its objective of encouraging improved educational outcomes, particularly in relation to attendance, engagement, learning achievement, staying on at school, and improving the level of parent and community involvement in school. The report was released in February 2012.

One thousand students participated in the study. Principals, teachers, sports academy staff, EES staff, parents /carers and community members also provided feedback on the program.

As part of the evaluation ACER reviewed the literature on student engagement and found there is considerable variation in how student engagement is understood and conceptualised and that few studies have examined the concept of engagement in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

ACER explored four dimensions of engagement: positive self-concept, belonging, participation and attendance. The data collected during the evaluation suggests that before the cognitive or academic elements of engagement – as shown in learning achievement – can occur in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, there first needs to be present both cultural identity and a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging relates both to a broader cultural identity and an affinity with a more specific group, such as an Academy or team.

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Feedback from students in the Sports Academies indicated improved levels of confidence and pride from developing new skills, having leadership opportunities, participating in team activities and undertaking other activities in a culturally safe environment. Students participating in the Education Engagement Strategies benefited from being exposed to a range of role models and activities.

A common feature of effective Academies and EES projects was the presence of highly skilled, culturally aware and dedicated staff members with the ability to build strong and trusted relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Other critical success factors identified in the evaluation were the following: a willingness to engage communities in the planning and processes before a project was implemented; strong support from school leadership and staff; effective communication between the school and project provider and sufficient resourcing.

The evaluation also showed the importance for the Academies in particular of having strong external partnerships, such as with community and business organisations, tertiary providers and potential funders, and the importance of regular monitoring and evaluation so improvement can be shown.

Overwhelmingly, the feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who participated in the evaluation was positive, particularly in relation to their attitudes to school, self-identity and self pride in being Aboriginal, and self-efficacy as learners.

The full evaluation report by a team of ACER researchers led by Michele Lonsdale is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/14/

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Australia a key player in international higher education student market, but competition is building

Australia is a key player in international higher education student provision and is now ranked third in the world, according to the latest *Joining the Dots* research briefing released by ACER.

Dr Daniel Edwards, ACER Senior Research Fellow, said Australia's net flow of international students is one of the highest in the world, even when calculated in the context of the total size of the higher education sector. Net flow is the ratio of incoming international students that the country hosts compared to outgoing domestic students studying abroad, expressed as a percentage of all tertiary education students in the country.

'Out of 109 countries, Australia is one of only seven nations in the world that has more than 100 000 international students. UNESCO figures indicate Australia is ranked third with more than 250 000 students, behind the UK with 370 000 and the US with 660 000,' Dr Edwards said.

'Importantly, the figures show that apart from Macao, Australia has the largest net flow ratio of the large international host countries. This highlights the importance of international students to Australian higher education in terms of relative size of the sector. It also provides some perspective on the relatively small proportion of students in Australia who undertake study abroad.'

Dr Edwards said Australia's international student market is heavily reliant on Asia and the Pacific – accounting for nearly 80 per cent of the cohort.

'Students from Asia travel in substantial numbers to a large variety of countries for higher education, meaning that the scope of competition for students in this region now and in the future is significant,' Dr Edwards said.

The largest number of higher education students abroad from Asia originate from China (510 314), India (195 107), South Korea (125 165), Malaysia (53 121), Japan (44 768), Vietnam (55 038), Hong Kong (32 944) and Indonesia (32 246).

Australia is currently the most popular destination for Malaysian, Hong Kong, Indonesian, Singaporean, Sri Lankan and New Zealand tertiary education students. It is also the second most popular destination for students from Vietnam, Nepal, Philippines, Solomon Islands and Brunei.

Dr Edwards said that while Australia remains one of the 'big fish' in the international student scene, growth in the size, quality and infrastructure for hosting international students in the future is likely to be substantial. This is signalling a warning to Australian providers that the number of host nations is growing, as is their capacity to compete for students.

Joining the Dots is a subscription-based resource provided by ACER to those with an interest in Australian higher education. The 2012 series is about to be launched and details for subscriptions are available at www.acer.edu.au/jtd or by emailing [. \(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](mailto:info@acer.edu.au)

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Opinion split on walking to school

A new study of neighbourhood satisfaction has revealed older residents believe it is safer for children to walk to school than the parents of primary school-aged children believe to be the case.

The study, by ACER Research Fellow Ms Catherine Underwood, examined survey responses from over 800 residents aged 60 years and over and from over 500 parents of students aged 5 to 12 years living in six Victorian municipalities.

The survey revealed that 79 per cent of older residents living in metropolitan areas and 69 per cent of those living in regional areas believe it is safe for children to walk or ride to school on their own. In contrast, only 40 per cent of parents living in metropolitan areas and 36 per cent of those living in regional areas agreed that it is safe for their child to travel to school independently.

There was similar disagreement between parents and older residents about whether it is safe for children to walk or ride to the local park or playground. Around 75 per cent of older residents living in metropolitan areas and 68 per cent of those living in regional areas agreed that it is safe for children to do so, compared to only 34 per cent of metropolitan parents and 49 per cent of regional parents.

Ms Underwood said the disparity between parents' and older residents' views on whether it is safe for children to independently walk or ride through their neighbourhood appears to be reflected in their perceptions of the danger presented to children by strangers.

'Stranger danger' was seen as a barrier to children's independent outdoor activity by 44 per cent of metropolitan older residents and 51 per cent of regional older residents.

Concern about 'stranger danger' was much higher among parents, with 76 per cent of parents living in metropolitan areas and 71 per cent of parents living in regional areas indicating that it is the most significant barrier to their child's physical activity in the neighbourhood. Road safety was the second most significant barrier identified by parents.

Around half of the parents surveyed (44 per cent of metropolitan parents and 51 per cent of regional parents) agreed that there is a lot of traffic along most nearby streets, making it difficult or unpleasant to go for walks. Here, older residents' responses were closer to parents', with 31 per cent of metropolitan older residents and 38 per cent of regional older residents agreeing that heavy traffic makes it difficult or unpleasant to walk.

'Despite their concerns about traffic, both older residents and parents had a very positive view of their neighbourhood,' said Ms Underwood.

Analysis was based on data looking at children's independent mobility and active transport collected in 2010 with funding from VicHealth.

Further information on the study is available in two downloadable fact sheets:

[Fact sheet: Neighbourhood Satisfaction Among Parents](#)

[Fact Sheet: Neighbourhood Satisfaction among Older Residents](#)

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Teacher certification system requires extensive development

Last year, the federal government announced a modified version of the Reward Payments for Great Teachers initiative. While the revised version is now firmly grounded in teaching standards, major challenges remain before we will have an effective certification scheme for promoting professional learning and linking pay to performance.

One challenge is to develop valid and efficient methods for gathering evidence that together cover all three standards domains: professional knowledge; teaching practice; and professional engagement.

New methods will be needed, for example, for assessing the standards for teacher knowledge, particularly knowledge about teaching different kinds of content. The National Professional Standards for Teaching developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) properly emphasise the importance of such knowledge, but as yet we have no validated methods for assessing it.

Developing a set of assessments that covers all the standards is only the first step. Carefully structured guidelines will also need to be developed to assist teachers in preparing evidence of their teaching and students' learning over time for assessment purposes in comparable ways. Procedures for training assessors of this evidence to high levels of reliability and for weighting the various forms of evidence will then need to be developed before work on the final stage of setting the standard for certification can be attempted.

The federal government's plan is to implement the scheme in 2013 at both the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher levels. This will leave only 2012 for development, which is unlikely to be enough time to develop and trial assessment methods for their validity and feasibility, or to check reliability and fairness in the systems for scoring the evidence.

Instead, the federal government should re-frame the initial 2012-2015 period of funding as a period for research, development and trialling of assessment methods, for building understanding and engagement from the teaching profession, and for training assessors and setting standards for the Highly Accomplished level only. The Lead Teacher level will require different types of assessment tasks based more on evidence of leadership than classroom practice—such methods are not even on the horizon yet in Australia—and should therefore be left till later when benefit can be gained from lessons learned.

In 2012, several assessment development teams will be needed: one for each of the several kinds of assessment methods under consideration. Hundreds of teachers will be needed in conducting preliminary pilots of the assessment methods, revising guidelines, involved in scoring, and ensuring worthwhile reporting to ensure all teachers grow and benefit from involvement (regardless of outcome).

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At the field testing stage, the participation of several thousand teacher volunteers will be necessary so that the psychometric properties of the assessments can be evaluated. It should be expected that the field tests in 2013 will indicate the need for further work, both on the standards and the assessment methods, which will in turn will lead to the need for refinements to be evaluated in 2014, before the certification system goes 'live' in 2015.

By that time, it is to be hoped that employing authorities and the public will have been convinced that the process is rigorous and ready to go to scale - and that teachers who gain certification are worth rewarding with a longer-term salary increase and recognition of their expertise, not a one-off bonus.

The establishment of a credible professional certification system will provide a valuable service to employing authorities committed to promoting teacher quality. Development of such a system could be the biggest step forward in the professionalisation of teachers in decades. It could restore teachers' esteem in the community because of the emphasis on quality, and it could lead to attracting better people into teaching as quality will clearly be seen to matter.

This opinion article by ACER Principal Research Fellow [Dr Lawrence Ingvarson](#) is adapted from a longer version published in the Australian College of Educators' [Professional Educator](#) magazine in February 2012.

Read the full article at <http://austcolled.com.au/article/national-certification-let%E2%80%99s-make-sure-we-get-it-right>

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ACER Update

NAB Schools First Application Forums

The *NAB Schools First* team will be travelling to metropolitan and regional centres across Australia in March 2012 to conduct 20 Application Forums. The Forums aim to provide important information on the awards criteria and the application process, answer your questions about the *NAB Schools First* program and showcase previous award winners. Networking opportunities with potential partners will also be facilitated.

Potential applicants looking for specific advice on submitting an application in 2012 and anyone interested in learning more about *NAB Schools First* should attend. For more information, and to register for the Application Forum nearest to you visit www.schoolsfirst.edu.au

Research Conference 2012

School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?

ACER's annual research conference will take place at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour from 26-28 August 2012. Further information including registration details, the conference program and a list of speakers is available from www.acer.edu.au/research-conference. Enquiries may be directed to Margaret Taylor by phone to 03 9277 5403 or by email to [\(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](mailto:.(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address))

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