



Graduate capability

Is it feasible to produce a generalisable assessment of higher education learning outcomes to demonstrate the capability of graduates? In a word, yes. **Hamish Coates** explains.

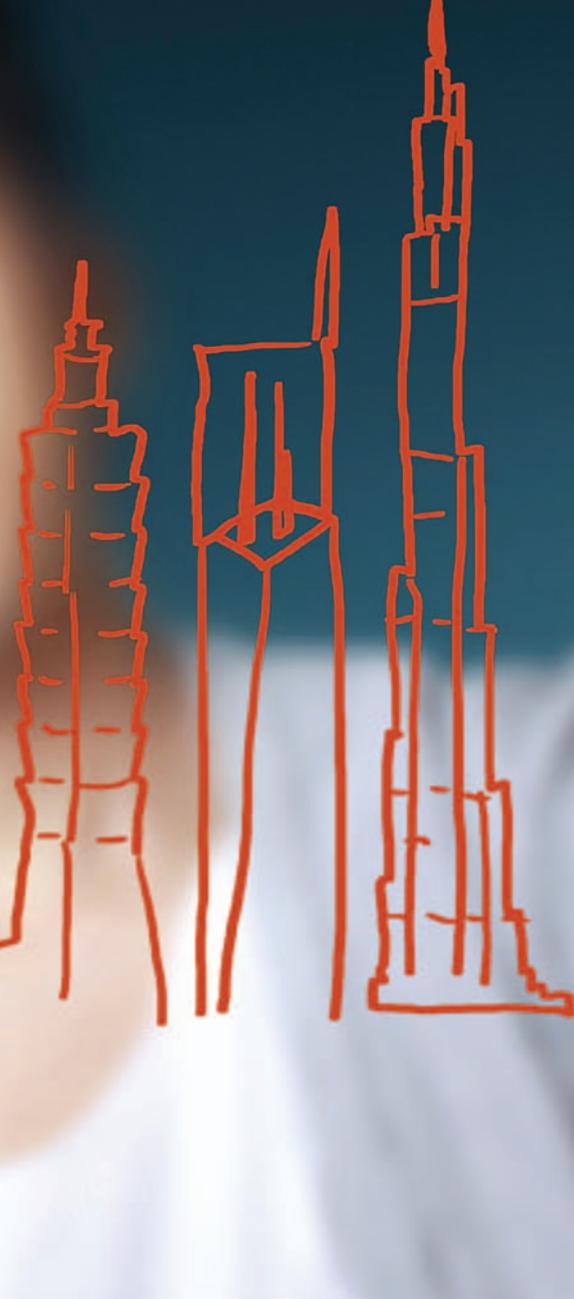
The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is working with international experts from hundreds of organisations in 16 participating countries to build 90-minute tests of the capacity of final-year bachelor degree students to solve complex and realistic problems.

The work began in late 2009, when the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) engaged an ACER-led global consortium to design, implement and evaluate the feasibility of an international Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO). ACER's work seeks to

produce generalisable information on learning beyond data available on research and other facets of higher education.

Assessing graduate capability

ACER is developing the AHELO 90-minute test for students of



engineering. The Educational Testing Service in New Jersey in the United States is developing the test for students of economics. Once the feasibility study is complete, OECD member countries will decide whether to proceed with a full-scale AHELO.

The AHELO are not tests of content that assume or provoke standardisation. Rather, they're carefully designed tasks that require final-year students to 'think like an engineer' or 'solve problems like an economist' – broadly, to demonstrate graduate capability essential to professional work. Pitching the assessments 'above curriculum content' creates space for teaching and curriculum innovation.

Innovation on this scale involves challenge and change. Over the last year international expert groups have agreed on the outcomes expected from a bachelor degree in economics or civil engineering.

AHELO economics, engineering and generic skills tests have been developed for administration to around 40,000 final-year bachelor degree students at 230 institutions in the first half of 2012. Around 10,000 academics will provide information on teaching and learning contexts.

Assessment collaboratives

From 2012, ACER will facilitate higher education assessment symposia that focus on the design, development and validation of assessment materials, in particular to:

- develop participant knowledge and skills, and disciplinary and institutional capacity
- help academics create assessment tasks for their distinctive contexts and needs
- enhance the quality of assessment resources, and
- initiate cross-institutional and international assessment communities and collaborations.

Resulting materials and ideas can be used by academics in lab assignments, examinations, clinical assessments and tests.

Assessment libraries

As an extension, ACER is preparing to work with academics and teaching support staff to develop a quality-assured curriculum-based assessment library of validated items for use in routine examinations, assignments, laboratories and tests.

The validated items can take many different formats, their defining characteristic being that they are designed to optimise the measurement, diagnosis, reporting and enhancement of learning.

The assessment material generated from the validated items will:

- provide intrinsically useful assessment data
- link with local disciplinary, curriculum and other contexts
- help bolster the quality of internally developed assessments
- provide a foundation for benchmarking, and
- yield baseline data for follow-up assessments.

ACER will be able to support teachers and institutions in the design of exams, selecting items from the library, adapting items to suit local contexts, scoring, and analysing and reporting results.

New perspectives

Developed systems around the world are moving into an era that places greater emphasis than ever before on understanding the outcomes of higher education, and on using results for monitoring and continuous improvement. This calls for assessments that yield valid and reliable data, and that are efficient to implement, analyse and report.

Assessment may rarely be considered intrinsically appealing, but it matters enormously. Poor quality assessment yields poor quality data that can have damaging consequences. AHELO aims to foster significant capacity to develop assessments that are technically sound, and that yield robust and relevant insights into what people achieve through university education.

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