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Building successful school-community partnerships

An evaluation of the NAB Schools First Awards released this month is providing evidence and examples of how school-community partnerships can nurture, improve and sustain the learning capacities and personal development of Australia's children.

The First Interim Report of NAB Schools First, by ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Robert Simons, followed the progress of the 2009 Impact and Seed Funding Award winners during 2010. In 2009, 88 winners were selected from 1552 applications. Of the 88 successful applicants, 53 agreed to take part in the evaluation.

The evaluation revealed that the primary objective of 52 of the partnerships reflected one of four themes: improved learning outcomes; development of workplace skills; promotion of healthy lifestyles, mental health and wellbeing; and social and emotional support for students and families. The remaining one of the participating winning partnerships nominated the primary objective of children's readiness for school.

Simons found that, as a result of the Awards, successful applicants were able to strengthen their partnership capacity by improving partnership performance and enhancing partnership expertise and with heightened partnership motivation and commitment.

All of the winning partnerships that had been in existence for more than five years tended to report that the Awards had the greatest impact on their capacity to improve implementation, including the quality and development of the programs and services. Where partnerships had existed for less than five years the Awards mainly acted to heighten motivation and commitment. In a smaller number of newer partnerships, the Awards facilitated the introduction of additional skill sets and expertise.

The evaluation also examined how effective NAB Schools First has been in providing financial recognition of success in establishing effective school-community partnerships and in providing

financial support to build stronger school-community partnerships.

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In all cases, the Awards either provided for already successful partnerships to grow their capacity to increase the number of partners and to benefit significantly larger numbers of students, or to facilitate the growth of early stage partnerships. All of the winning partnerships reported improvements in student attendance, retention or graduation rates, academic performance, continuing engagement in learning and improvements in self-esteem.

The evaluation identified five success factors that were critical to enabling the Impact and Seed Funding Award winners to strengthen or expand their partnerships and thereby improve student outcomes. These five critical success factors are detailed below.

The flexibility that the models of funding gave to partnerships

The large amount of investment provided to the winners and the flexibility the winners had in applying the funding contributed significantly to the development and growth of school-community partnerships.

Strategic thinking and planning for partnership growth and expansion

The flexibility of the funding model enabled and encouraged partnerships to think strategically about enhancing existing programs and about extending them to a greater number of students.

The establishment of formalised structures and processes of communication

Successful partnership growth and expansion requires formalised structures and processes of communication that incorporate shared-decision making, clear roles and responsibilities, frequent and effective communication and regular monitoring and review.

The development and implementation of strategies for sustainability

Nearly all of the partnerships had ensured that effective partnerships were sustainable for the next three to five years and did not become vulnerable to one-off short term funding grants.

The demonstrated capacity for the partnership to be replicated in other settings

One of the strongest indicators of a partnership's growth is its capacity for replication. Only one of the winning partnerships that participated in this evaluation had reached this point, however the report concluded that the achievements and accomplishments made possible by the winning partnerships suggest that they offer a viable model for other school-community partnerships in Australia.

The five strategic success factors that were identified among the winning partnerships suggest that, overall, the NAB Schools First initiative has contributed to a significant increase in strategic capacity for the enhancement and growth of partnerships beyond that envisioned before the existence of the Awards.

Simons concludes that the partnerships demonstrated that improved learning outcomes are not achieved by schools addressing the problem on their own; rather, schools can be much more effective when the complementary objectives of schools and stakeholders in the community are aligned.

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The full report is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/6/

The NAB Schools First Awards have been developed by ACER, the Foundation for Young Australians and the National Australia Bank. Further information is available from www.schoolsfirst.edu.au

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Work and study

Whereas once upon a time a student's employment was seen to be a distraction from their studies, driven by economic necessity, in 2010 off-campus paid work appears to have become a natural and rewarding part of undergraduate life.

In a briefing paper to come from the 2010 administration of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), ACER Director of Higher Education Research Associate Professor Hamish Coates suggests that universities need to do more to support the large numbers of university students who work while studying.

Results from the last four administrations of AUSSE show that around two-thirds of Australian university students participate in paid work off-campus. Between 2007 and 2010 the figure for first-year students has varied from 63 per cent in 2009 to 69 per cent in 2008. For later-year students the figure jumped from 70 per cent in 2009 to 77 per cent in 2010. Taking part in paid work did not increase the likelihood of early departure.

"There are numerous reasons why students undertake paid work during their undergraduate studies," said Coates. "Financial responsibilities, opportunities to socialise, reinforcing academic skills, career formation, meeting family expectations, cultural factors and sheer enjoyment are just some of the motivations to work."

Personal demographics also influenced whether or not a student works. For example, more women work than men, and for longer hours. People who receive financial support from the government or their university work less than those who do not. International students work less than their domestic counterparts. Students from high or middle socioeconomic backgrounds work less than low SES students. Strikingly, students living with their parents are more likely to work than those living with partners or by themselves, or in on- or off-campus student accommodation.

AUSSE revealed a striking relationship between participation in paid off-campus work and academic performance. There was a positive connection between grades and paid work for students who work one to 10 hours per week. People working 11 to 20 hours per week tended to have average grades. The grades of students working more than 20 hours per week were fairly evenly spread, with a slight dip towards the upper achievement levels.

"If learning how to think is the primary purpose of university, then getting a job at the end likely comes a close second," said Coates. "AUSSE shows that students who participate in off-campus paid work report greater development of employability skills and career readiness."

Results from the Graduate Pathways Survey, Australia's first census of bachelor degree students five years after graduation, similarly discovered students who participated in paid work were much more likely to move seamlessly into paid work after graduation and to receive higher salaries. One year after graduation 49 per cent of those who did not work for pay as an undergraduate were in full-time graduate employment, compared to 67 per cent for those who worked 21 to 30 hours and 78 per cent for those who worked 31 hours or more.

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"Helping students develop the employability skills and professional capabilities they will need to make the transition into graduate roles is one of the most important aspects of university study," said Coates. "For example, AUSSE shows that students who do work experience or an industry placement report significantly higher engagement and outcomes than those who do not."

Students' participation in and returns from paid work, however, are misaligned with the careers support they receive from institutions. While 66 per cent of Australian first-years worked for pay off campus in 2010, only 7 per cent consulted a careers service for advice, and only half (52 per cent) reported that their paid work had no or very little relation to their study.

Strikingly, 41 per cent of first-years and 27 per cent of later-years said that in the current academic year they 'never' blended academic learning with workplace experience, talked about career plans with academics (59 per cent first-years, 45 per cent later-years), or worked with academics on activities outside of coursework (76 per cent first years, 70 per cent later years).

Such misalignment is concerning and has the potential to cause inefficiencies in students' education. The disconnected nature of students' work and study creates conflict and fails to capitalise on opportunities for work-derived learning and using academic skills in the workplace.

"AUSSE clearly shows that students are participating in paid work, that such work yields positive returns for learners and graduates," said Coates. "Institutions need to do more to support learners and capitalise on their vocational activities."

The AUSSE briefing, *Working on a dream: Educational returns from off-campus paid work*, and further information on AUSSE is available from <http://ausse.acer.edu.au>

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Testing basic mathematics in Norway

The Norwegian government is investing in training and assessment initiatives designed to improve student numeracy levels.

In April a group of delegates from the Norwegian Centre for Mathematics Education (NSMO) travelled to ACER's Melbourne office to participate in a series of customised training workshops on computer-based testing. Over four days, ACER and NSMO engaged in conversations on the topics of the rationale for the use of interactive digital test items in large scale assessment, the challenges of developing test items for an interactive digital medium, the decisions and practices that ACER has adopted in the development of interactive digital test items in large scale assessments and the topic of education systems and practices in Australia and Norway.

The purpose of the study visit was to increase NSMO's capacity to develop interactive test items for the computer-based National Test in Basic Skills in Mathematics. Introduced in 2004 and computerised in 2009, the test is designed to assess student's ability to use basic mathematical skills such as number, measuring and statistics in different contexts.

"It is not a test of mathematics curriculum, rather it is a test of mathematical competence in all school subjects, including Society and Environment, Physical Education and Science," said NSMO's Grethe Ravlo.

Norway's National Test is conducted in Years 5 and 8, or with 10 year-old and 13 year-old students respectively. Around 60 000 students at each year level take the annual computer-based National Test in Basic Skills in Mathematics, as well as the National Test in Norwegian Reading and the National Test in English.

In Norway, Ravlo leads a team of nine educators who develop the National Test in Basic Skills in Mathematics. In addition to working at NSMO developing the National Test, these nine educators are also working part-time as teachers, teaching in classes ranging from Year 5 through to university level.

"We have teachers developing items for the national assessment," said Ravlo. "This is very important."

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Over the last decade, Norway's assessment results have shown mathematics to be an area of concern. In 2010 students from Year 9 were also asked to take the Year 8 National Test in Basic Skills in Mathematics. Results revealed the Year 9 students performed only slightly better than Year 8 students.

Measuring and fractions are problem areas for many Norwegian students. Statistics, on the other hand, is an area that their students tend to perform well in, as can be seen in Norway's PISA results.

Results from the first administration of PISA in 2000 revealed that Norwegian students were performing at around the OECD average. The 2003 PISA administration showed a slight decline and in 2006 Norway performed significantly below the OECD average. Results from PISA 2009 show that the downward trend has been reversed, as Norway's students are very close to level they were in 2000 and are now performing at around the OECD average. However, Ravlo and her colleagues at NSMO think Norway can and should do better.

"There is not always a connection between what we want our children know and what they actually know," said Ravlo. "They have much more to learn."

Ravlo explained that some Norwegian parents are not good at mathematics and so they do not expect their children to be good at mathematics.

"We can't accept that," said Ravlo. "We have courses for parents in Norway, called 'Family Maths', where they sit together with the children doing activities and playing games. In this way we can encourage the parents to give their children inspiration and enthusiasm in learning mathematics."

NSMO also provides training courses for classroom teachers, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, to coordinate and develop new and better ways to teach mathematics at all levels in school, by connecting teaching theory and practice. The Ministry of Education's framework for national tests underpins the computer-based National Test in Basic Skills in Mathematics that NSMO is developing.

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ACER Update

Research Conference 2011

The ACER Research Conference 2011 Indigenous Education: Pathways to success will be held in Darwin on 7-9 August. The conference will focus on what we can learn from research about creating and sustaining positive educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Presenters will highlight the conditions, contexts, curriculum, pedagogy and practices that establish pathways to success for Indigenous students.

The full conference program is now available online. The keynote presentations are:

- Educational Success: A sustainable outcome for all Indigenous students when teachers understand where the learning journey begins, Professor Jeannie Herbert, Charles Sturt University, NSW
- Creating Indigenous Classrooms of Tomorrow Today: What children will need to know and how to create it?, Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Flinders University, SA
- Key factors influencing educational outcomes for Indigenous students and their implications for planning and practice in the NT, Professor Jonathon Carapetis, Menzies School of Health Research, NT
- Indigenous Education: Finding face, making space, having place, Professor Lorna Williams, University of Victoria BC, Canada

The conference will be relevant to those directly involved in Indigenous education as well as those concerned more broadly with we can learn from research about creating and sustaining positive educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Early bird registrations close 1 July. For more information visit www.acer.edu.au/conference

NAB Schools First enters third year

Schools throughout Australia are once again invited to apply for a NAB Schools First award and be in the running to share in over \$5 million. Seed Funding and Impact Award applications open on 20 June and close on 29 July. The winners will be announced in September. This year there is a Student Award open to students with a great idea for a school-community partnership. Applications for the Student Award open on 9 May and close on 27 May.

NAB Schools First, a strong partnership between NAB, ACER and the Foundation for Young Australians, is designed to recognise excellence in school-community partnerships. It is Australia's largest corporate initiative of its kind and is open to all schools around the country. This year, 60 Impact Awards will be awarded while the number of Seed Funding Awards has increased from 40 to 50.

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Impact winners will receive \$50,000 each and Seed Funding winners will receive \$25,000. To date, 195 Australian schools have shared in \$10.15 million award money to support their school-community partnership.

To find out more about NAB Schools First and to download application forms, awards criteria, guidelines and Terms and Conditions visit www.schoolsfirst.edu.au or call 1800 649 141.

ACER Institute launches graduate programs

In 2011 ACER Institute launched two research-based and practice-focused graduate programs for teachers. The Graduate Program in the Teaching of Reading and the Graduate Program in the Assessment of Student Learning are university recognised programs that contribute towards a Masters degree. These two Programs were delivered to a group of students from the Queensland Department of Education in March.

The Graduate Programs are delivered to experienced and practicing educational professionals via off-campus study methods incorporating both face to face and online components, while the participants' practice provides the environment for the integral action research component of the program.

The goals of the Graduate Programs are to provide education professionals with relevant, evidence based information to immediately enhance their skills, knowledge and effectiveness in their role as teachers and school leaders. Further information is available from www.acerinstitute.edu.au

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