Reforming Educational Assessment: Imperatives, principles and challenges

Geoff N Masters

Reforming Educational Assessment

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AER 57 reviews research into assessment, especially in schools; it analyses the pivotal role of assessment in learning and argues for its reconceptualisation by practitioners and policy makers to better support learning. The genesis of this AER was the ACER Research Conference Assessment and Student Learning: Collecting, interpreting and using data to inform teaching, held in Perth in August 2009.

Section 1 outlines some current pressures for assessment reform, introduces the concept of a learning assessment system designed to establish where learners are in their progress within an empirically mapped domain of learning, and sketches a set of design principles for such a system. Section 2 considers pressures for assessment reform in greater detail and the implications of these pressures for educational assessment practice. It is observed that traditional assessment methods are often not well aligned with current understandings of learning, and are of limited value for assessing deep understandings, life skills that develop only over extended periods of time, or more personalised and flexible forms of learning. Section 3 analyses and illustrates five design principles for an effective Learning Assessment System. Section 4 considers some practical challenges to the implementation of this kind of Learning Assessment System, including: the changing of widely held perceptions about educational assessment; the development of deep understandings of how learning occurs within specific learning domains; the promotion of more coherent systems of assessment across a range of educational contexts; and the promotion of higher levels of assessment literacy across the profession.

Geoff Masters has been CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) since 1998. In this role he has maintained his professional interest in the practical implementation of modern measurement theory and in developing better assessments of educational outcomes. He has led Australian and international research in the area of educational assessment, especially into large-scale testing by education systems, has reviewed education systems in terms of their effectiveness and approaches to change, and has published widely.

Gordon Stanley, formerly President of the NSW Board of Studies, holds honorary professorships (in Education and Psychology) at the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney, and is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Oxford.

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