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Decrease in number of students considering dropping out of university

There has been a decrease in the number of university students who are considering leaving university before graduation, according to a new report released by ACER.

Dropout DNA, and the genetics of effective support, the latest research briefing from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), was released in June.

The number of first-year students who seriously considered leaving university before graduation decreased from 35 to 27 per cent between 2008 and 2010. The number of later-year students increased, however, from 31 to 34 per cent between 2008 and 2010.

“People seek to drop out due to boredom rather than for more practical or financial reasons, while students who feel supported are more likely to complete their courses,” said AUSSE Director and the report’s co-author, ACER Higher Education Research Director Associate Professor Hamish Coates.

“Student retention is vital to increasing the quality and productivity of higher education. Student attrition has a negative impact on individuals, institutions and the broader economy,” he said.

The report recommends that universities increase resourcing for student support, including staff contact, course advice, mentoring, transition programs, academic writing courses, internship opportunities, counselling and other student services.

Boredom was the most common reason for students to consider leaving university, followed by change of direction, study-life balance, workload difficulty, and health or stress.

The report also revealed that:

- International students are more inclined to cite quality concerns, difficulty paying fees and personal reasons than domestic students
- Students from remote areas of Australia are more likely to cite personal or family reasons, needing a break, workload, financial difficulties and paid work responsibilities

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- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to leave due to family responsibilities, personal reasons, study-life balance and financial responsibilities
- Indigenous students, students with a self-reported disability and students studying part-time or externally are all more likely to have departure intentions.

AUSSE research shows that student support plays a vital role in engaging students in higher education and retaining students to graduation. Students who feel that their institution provides them with academic and social support are more satisfied, more engaged with their learning and more likely to report that their experience in higher education has helped them develop skills and knowledge. Thus, they are less likely to have departure intentions.

AUSSE is a collaboration between ACER and participating universities. The 2010 survey involved around 55 000 students from 55 Australian and New Zealand tertiary institutions.

The full report is available from www.acer.edu.au/research/ausse

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Future of regional communities relies on regional higher education

Regional higher education institutions contribute significantly to the potential for Australia's regional communities to develop a sustainable future, a recently released report suggests.

The Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) this month released an ACER report on the characteristics, motivations, experiences and outcomes of students enrolled at higher education institutions in regional areas of Australia.

The report revealed that, five years after completing their courses, 66 per cent of those who were enrolled at regional institutions and are employed are still living in regional areas. Report co-author and ACER Senior Research Fellow, Dr Sarah Richardson said the findings challenge assumptions that most regional students move to the city after graduation.

"We now know that the majority of people who study at a regional higher education institution stay in the area when they graduate," said Richardson. "This means that higher education provision in regional areas is vital to ensure the sustainable development of regional communities."

Richardson said that students at regional higher education institutions have different needs to students who study in cities due to differing demographics. Students enrolled at regional institutions are more likely to be female and tend to be older than their metropolitan counterparts. They are more likely to care for dependents and are more likely to be Indigenous.

"Regional students need more flexible modes of education, access to childcare facilities and greater financial support to cope with their caring responsibilities," Richardson said.

The report examined information from seven national data sources, including the Australian Census, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, the Graduate Destination Survey, the Graduate Pathways Survey and the Higher Education Student Collection. It found that:

- Students at regional institutions are equally as satisfied with their studies and engaged as those at metropolitan institutions.
- Regional students feel that their studies prepare them for employment better than metropolitan students, and are more likely to feel that their employability and skills are 'excellent'.
- Graduates from regional institutions are less likely than graduates from metropolitan institutions to move directly into further study, but equally likely to have done so within five years of completing their course.

Surprisingly, the study found that regional students are less likely to study subjects of direct relevance to regional economies – like natural and physical sciences, engineering or agriculture – than metropolitan students.

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The dominant areas of study of regional students are management and commerce, health, society and culture and education. Around 29 per cent of students who study in regional areas are employed as teachers in the same region five years after graduation.

Richardson notes that the lack of a targeted study of students who attend regional higher education institutions means that it is difficult to distinguish between students who study in remote areas of Australia and students who study in large regional towns. Despite this difficulty, the research shows that the presence of one or more higher education institutions in a regional area is likely to mean that its workforce is equipped with greater skills and expertise than would otherwise be the case.

The full report, Australian Regional Higher Education: Student characteristics and experiences, by ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Sarah Richardson and ACER Research Fellow Tim Friedman, is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/22/

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Dog walkers more likely to engage in independent outdoor activities

Children who walk their pet dog also are more likely to engage in general independent outdoor activities without adult supervision, according to ACER research released in June.

The study sought to discover whether walking a pet dog increases children's physical activity and their ability to move through their neighbourhood without adult supervision, also known as independent mobility.

The research involved an analysis of survey data and pictures drawn by more than 800 Victorian primary school children aged between 8 and 12 years. It found that 76 per cent of children who walk their pet dog report being allowed to go outside to play with friends without adult supervision, compared to only 59 per cent of children who do not own a dog.

The study did not measure the activities of children who had a pet dog and did not walk it.

Results showed that children who walk their pet dog were more likely, than children who do not have a pet dog, to have independently done the following activities five or more times in the previous week:

- play in the street (28 per cent compared to 17 per cent);
- play in the back yard (48 per cent compared to 37 per cent);
- play in the front yard (28 per cent compared to 17 per cent);
- go to the local park (14 per cent compared to 8 per cent);
- go to a friend's house (12 per cent compared to 6 per cent).

ACER Research Fellow Catherine Underwood said the study found that children who walked their pet dog demonstrated greater awareness of their neighbourhood.

"They were more likely to know their way around their local area and included greater detail in their drawings of their neighbourhood than children who did not own a dog," said Underwood.

"It is important that children have a well balanced lifestyle that combines study and outdoor physical activity. A pet dog will encourage such positive behaviour."

Analysis was based on an aspect of data looking at children's independent mobility and active transport collected in 2010 using VicHealth funded data. Data was collected from 1,427 primary school aged children from Prep to year 6 aged 4 to 12 years across 19 Primary Schools in Victoria.

Catherine Underwood presented the research at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the International Society for Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity in Melbourne from 15 to 18 June.

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National assessment reports on health of UAE school system

Results from the 2010 United Arab Emirate National Assessment Program (UAENAP) show that, on average, UAE students are performing well in the areas of Reading, Mathematics and Science but need to do better in Writing and Spelling.

More than 40 000 students from 285 schools participated in the November 2010 assessment, which assessed all students in Grades 3, 5, 7 and 9 in the Emirates of Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al Khaimeh, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain.

The results indicate that on average students in Grades 3, 5, 7 and 9 are performing well relative to the expected curriculum outcomes in Arabic and English Reading, Mathematics and Science. There is considerable variation in the results with some students performing exceptionally well. On average the mean performance of girls is better than the mean performance of boys, but boys are well represented in the top performing students.

The study shows that there is room for improvement in the areas of Writing and Spelling, both in Arabic and English and especially for boys. Alan Egbert, Manager of ACER's Dubai office, said that these findings are a cause of concern and need to be addressed.

"These results highlight some long-term and short-term recommendations that need to be implemented, including modifying the curriculum and focusing more on writing activities in schools," said Egbert.

UAENAP aims to investigate the progress of students against the standards defined national curriculum and to gather data to inform decisions about the allocation of resources, curriculum development and teacher development to improve the learning outcomes of UAE students.

The study is conducted by the UAE Ministry of Education with assistance from ACER. Minister for Education, Humaid Mohammad Obaid Al Qutami, first commissioned the study in order to monitor the current health of the UAE education system and provide evidence about how the system is performing in meeting the goals of the 'Education 2020' policy introduced in 2007.

Under UAENAP, a range of reports are provided to all levels of the educational community. At the highest level, the Minister and the ministry receive an overview of the performance of students across all the participating Emirates and information about the strengths and weaknesses in their current learning. This information can be used to inform policy and curriculum development for the nation. At each level of the education system there are reports to assist educators in improving student learning, with reports to Zone Directors, the principal of every school and each classroom teacher about the performance of students in their care.

Parents also receive a report that shows their child's results in each subject, both in terms of their success in individual skills and overall as an indication of their standard in the subject. The standards statements also indicate to parents the types of skills that students need to acquire in order to improve their learning outcomes.

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"The tests not only show the children how they have fared but also provide the actual expectations," said Egbert. "This will help tremendously in their personal goal setting for improvement."

Following this successful first implementation of UAENAP, the survey will next be conducted in January 2012 and will continue annually.

Further information on ACER's International Development work is available from <http://www.acer.edu.au/international/>

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

Principal for a Day

Principal for a Day is a collaboration between schools and their communities that aims to increase and strengthen relationships, based on knowledge and understanding, between the private sector and education. Victoria's Principal for a Day event takes place this year on Tuesday 23 August. The program is a joint partnership between ACER and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and has been running in Victoria since 2001. Schools and community and business leaders interested in participating in the 2011 event can obtain more information from www.acer.edu.au/pfad or by contacting Ms Viv Acker on 03 9277 5617 or email [\(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](mailto:..(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address)).

NAB Schools First

Applications for the 2011 NAB Schools First Seed Funding and Impact awards are now open. For the third consecutive year, schools are invited to apply and be in the running to share in over \$5 million. In 2011, 60 Impact Award winners will receive \$50 000 each and 50 Seed Funding winners will receive \$25 000 each. Applications close on 29 July. The winners will be announced on 15 September, followed by the announcement of State and National Awards in October and November. To find out more about NAB Schools First visit www.schoolsfirst.edu.au or call 1800 649 141.

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