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## Using TV to improve Indigenous learning

A recent ACER report provides an evidence base for the development of a high quality educational television program aimed primarily at Indigenous children aged from three to six years. The report, by Michele Lonsdale, is based on a review of the literature on the importance of early childhood learning, the nature of Indigenous learning needs, and the role of educational television programs in improving outcomes for children.

The main objectives of the ACER and Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) initiative are:

- To improve school readiness for Indigenous preschool-aged children;
- To strengthen the sense of connectedness that Indigenous children feel to their culture and to other Indigenous communities;
- To provide families and schools with a resource that will promote learning, and encourage interaction around learning; and
- To improve the cultural understanding of non-Indigenous children in relation to Indigenous culture.

There is extensive research that shows the critical importance of early childhood in children's learning and development, including for long-term educational outcomes. On a range of educational indicators, there is still a significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. Participation rates in early childhood programs, for example, are lower for Indigenous children than for their non-Indigenous peers.

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There are several dimensions that are generally recognised as being fundamental to school readiness, regardless of ethnicity, race or culture. These include physical wellbeing and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, cognition and general knowledge. An additional dimension for Indigenous students is connectedness to community.

Studies show that television is playing a critical role in revitalising Indigenous languages and encouraging a sense of pride among Indigenous viewers in other countries. A targeted television program could assist Indigenous preschool children in Australia with successful transition from home to school, and give them the best possible start to their formal schooling.

The report discusses the benefits of other educational television programs and includes research relating to popular programs such as Sesame Street, Dora the Explorer, Playschool and Pinky Dinky Do.

The proposal to develop a children's television program targeting Indigenous children comes at a time when there is strong government support for initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for Indigenous children.

One of the strengths of this initiative is that it is not grounded in a deficit model of Indigenous performance but seeks to build on the cultural knowledge, values and aspirations of Indigenous communities.

The children's television initiative also offers an opportunity to contribute to existing research on the ways in which a targeted educational program can help improve school readiness for Indigenous children, close the gap on literacy and numeracy, promote learning opportunities for Indigenous families through co-viewing, and enhance the cross-cultural understanding of young children. An evaluation could show the kind of learning that takes place as a result of the program and the long-term impact on Indigenous children of early exposure to a culturally specific television series.

The report, *Using television to improve learning opportunities for Indigenous children*, is available on the [ACER website](#).

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## TAFE loses ground in post-school landscape

Victorian school leavers are changing their preferences for TAFE courses in relation to other education and training destinations, according to a paper presented to a recent conference on the economics of education.

Dr Phillip McKenzie, ACER Research Director, Transitions and Policy Analysis, and Dr Sheldon Rothman, ACER Principal Research Fellow, Program Analysis, used information from the Victorian Government's On Track annual survey of school leavers to show how vocational education and training (VET) fits into the post-school landscape.

"TAFE has declined in relative importance as a destination for Victorian Year 12 completers between 2003 and 2010," Dr McKenzie said. "However, TAFE is showing renewed take-up by early school leavers, particularly in programs for lower-level certificates."

The proportion of Victorian school completers enrolled in a TAFE course in the year after leaving school declined from 27 per cent in 2003 to 18 per cent in 2008, and has remained steady since then.

The proportion of early school leavers enrolled in a TAFE course in the year after leaving school has increased over the past two years to 21 per cent, following a decline from 23 per cent in 2003 to 15 per cent in 2006, where it plateaued until 2008.

Apprenticeships and traineeships increased as a destination for Victorian school completers between 2003 and 2010 and remained largely steady for early leavers. Among school completers, university has increased in importance as a destination in the year following school.

"The net effect is that VET enrolled smaller proportions of both school completers and early leavers in 2010 than in 2003," Dr McKenzie said. "However, VET still remains a very significant sector, attracting about 25 per cent of school completers and 50 per cent of early leavers in 2010."

Dr McKenzie explained that these changes in post-school destinations are occurring within the context of rising school completion rates and the diversification of the school study experience.

"Of all those people that are leaving school in Victoria, a higher proportion of them have finished Year 12 or equivalent," Dr McKenzie said, referring to those who graduate with either the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), with or without a VET component, or with the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

In 2003, only one in seven students chose not to study 'straight VCE', or VCE without a VET component. Since then participation in VCE with VET has been growing by about 1.5 percentage points per year and participation in VCAL has been growing by about one percentage point per year. Consequently, now one in three students is not studying straight VCE.

"VET is far from losing its attractiveness," Dr McKenzie said, "however its comparative position in the post school education and training landscape has changed."

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Between 2003 and 2010, almost 310 000 young people participated in the On Track surveys. ACER has been contracted since 2008 by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for the overall management, design, analysis and reporting.

The 2010 Annual Conference of the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET), 'Education and training for a more productive Australia', was held in Melbourne on Friday 29 October at Ascot House, 50 Fenton St, Ascot Vale. The presentations are available from the [CEET website](#)

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## Curriculum not the cause of inequalities

School sector and socioeconomic inequalities in students' tertiary entrance performance and university entry cannot be attributed to the structure of the senior secondary school curriculum, a study suggests.

A paper published in the Educational Research and Evaluation journal, written by ACER Principal Research Fellow Gary Marks, examines the role of senior school courses – referred to as the “stratified curriculum” in mediating or accounting for the relationships between socioeconomic status (SES), school sector, and university entrance.

One prominent explanation for school sector and socioeconomic inequalities in university entrance is that the curriculum is stratified in such a way to the boost the performance of private school and high SES students.

“This study questions whether the stratified curriculum is the reason why private school and high socioeconomic status are associated with better tertiary entrance performance,” said Marks.

The research suggests that senior secondary curriculum structure, which gives weighting to some subjects over others, plays only a minor role in accounting for the influences of school sector and socioeconomic background on educational outcomes.

Marks' research found that, while the type of course students take during senior school year has a strong impact on both tertiary entrance performance and university enrolment, its effects are largely independent of school sector and socioeconomic background.

“If a student studies the highly-weighted subjects in Year 11 and 12, like physics or French, they usually get a higher tertiary entrance score than a student that studies the less-weighted subjects, like media studies or business management,” said Marks.

“This is true whether the student went to a government or non-government school and whether the student is from a high SES or low SES background.”

The research revealed that only a quarter to a third of school sector differences in tertiary entrance performance can be attributed to socioeconomic background and subject selection. Socioeconomic background accounts for less than 10 per cent of the variation in both tertiary entrance score and university enrolment.

Although attending an independent school was shown to increase the odds of university enrolment up to 2.7 times, the paper noted that selective government schools, which recruit students almost solely on ability, perform as well or better than the highest performing independent schools.

Marks said subject choice is a stronger influence on university enrolment than on tertiary entrance scores because some subjects prepare students for university study while others prepare students for other forms of tertiary study or are orientated for direct entry to the labour market.

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“It is true that students from higher SES background and those who attend independent schools are more likely to pursue particular subject clusters that facilitate entry to university,” said Marks, “but course type does not explain socioeconomic and school sector differences in student outcomes.”

Marks recommends that other possible causes for the differences should be explored, such as educational aspirations, parental pressure, social norms regarding the importance of education, students' attitudes towards education, and teachers.

The full article, 'School sector and socioeconomic inequalities in university entrance in Australia: the role of the stratified curriculum', was published by the international journal *Education Research and Evaluation* in April 2010 and is available to download from Gary's [publications page](#) < [http://works.bepress.com/gary\\_marks/71/](http://works.bepress.com/gary_marks/71/) >

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## Blurred for the better? The future of tertiary education

A new Australian tertiary education sector is likely to see a blurring of lines between the VET and Higher Education sectors as the shape of institutions changes, a recent conference on the economics of education heard.

A panel of experts came together in Melbourne on Friday 29 October to speak at the 14th annual national conference of the Monash University – Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) on the topic 'Education and training for a more productive Australia'.

Keynote speaker Virginia Simmons AO, a consultant with over 23 years experience as a TAFE CEO, told conference attendees the convergence of the current VET sector and Higher Education sector has necessitated the change to a new tertiary sector.

"We now have a VET sector with an extremely blurred identity," Simmons said. "You ask people to define VET and it's very difficult to do it."

According to Simmons, there is also a lot of confusion about what a VET provider is, as there are over 4500 registered training organisations (RTOs) operating within schools, universities, enterprise RTOs, community providers, other private providers and the 59 TAFEs.

"The philosophy was, the more providers we have, the greater the competition, the better the competition, the more efficient is the sector," Simmons said.

Simmons argues that this approach, enabled by what she terms an "open, light touch" regulatory environment, brings up huge issues with effective regulation and has led to wide variations in performance.

"We now have TAFE Institutes and the higher performing private providers distancing themselves from the VET sector," Simmons said. "I think this is a lot to do with the push for a tertiary sector because (high performing institutions) have wanted to distance themselves from what is seen as the flotsam and jetsam that has been allowed to emerge in the VET sector."

According to Simmons, over the next decade a new tertiary sector will emerge, consisting of dual-sector institutions, of universities with colleges or RTO status, of public and private organisations offering vocational and higher education and training, of polytechnics, of higher education partnerships, of franchise arrangements between TAFEs and Higher Education providers, and of the 'omniversity' such as is planned for the University of Canberra.

Robin Shreeve, CEO of Skills Australia, noted in his keynote presentation that many of these changes are already occurring.

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"It strikes me that we're increasingly uncoupling institutions from sectors," Shreeve said. "We've got VET sector institutions offering Higher Education programs and we've got Higher Education institutions becoming RTOs."

In their presentation on the post-school destinations of Victorian school leavers, ACER Research Director, Dr Phil McKenzie, and ACER Principal Research Fellow, Dr Sheldon Rothman, also acknowledged the changes already taking place in the tertiary education sector. What they once referred to as the 'university' destination of school leavers is now known as the 'Bachelor degree' destination, in recognition of the fact that Bachelor level qualifications are offered by a range of tertiary institutions and not just by universities.

Dr Tom Karmel, General Manager of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), similarly suggested during his keynote presentation that VET institutions and Higher Education institutions cannot be easily divided.

"I think it's getting less and less clear what vocational education and training is about," Karmel said. "Since I can't define VET, I can't define what a VET provider is."

Karmel said that in the future, instead of VET providers and Higher Education institutions, Australia will have tertiary institutions operating in different ways. According to Karmel the possible types of tertiary institutions are: the research university, whose emphasis is on research; the omni-university or omniversity, teaching everything from Certificate 1 through to PhDs; the polytechnic, which offers high quality teaching from Certificate 1 through potentially to a Masters degree by coursework; and what Karmel likes to call the residual TAFE, that concentrates on everything up to Certificate 4 and possibly acts as a feeder to the other institutions.

Karmel, Simmons and Shreeve all agreed that the need for transparency and accountability is among the most important factors in the success of a new tertiary sector.

"The first thing that we need is transparent data," Shreeve said. "In Australia it's really difficult to get data about completion rates. You can't get data about completion rates about individual providers in the public domain."

Shreeve, who was previously the CEO of the City of Westminster College in London as well being a TAFE Institute Director in NSW, explained that you can look at UK completion rates on the internet for different institutions, different levels and different courses. Shreeve showed that Australia's best State-wide VET course completion rate is approximately 50 per cent (in ACT), compared to the UK's whole course success rate for their closest equivalent to TAFE institutions of almost 80 per cent. He noted however that the way short programs like "skillsets" are treated in Australia makes absolute comparisons difficult.

"Can I suggest that there's room for improvement?" Shreeve said, indicating the availability of more transparent public information about providers' performance creates accountability that may lead to this type of improvement.

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Simmons said that a shared and coordinated information database is enormously important because we currently can't really make comparisons between VET and Higher Education. Simmons also contended that the State governments are trying to differentiate their VET sector rather than work towards national cohesion and, in order to be effective, the new tertiary sector must instead move away from State and Territory regulation and become a national sector.

"It's a very rich world in the tertiary world," Simmons said. "New national protocols and changing funding and government attitudes would lead us to a very strong future."

Further information about the 2010 CEET conference is available from the [CEET website](#).

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## ACER Update

### ACER announces new Research Division Heads

In late October ACER appointed [Dr Sue Thomson](#) to head the newly created Educational Monitoring and Research Division and [Dr Khoo Siek Toon](#) to the role of Acting Head of the Assessment and Psychometric Research Division. The new appointments and divisional structure follow the recent retirement of Dr John Ainley after a decade leading ACER's entire research effort.

Dr Thomson has a distinguished research career, specialising in the study of how and why countries and education systems differ in their educational outputs and performances. The new Educational Monitoring and Research Division that she will lead consists of almost 70 staff undertaking research and development in the areas of national surveys, international surveys, higher education, student transitions, policy analysis, program evaluation, teaching, learning and leadership.

Dr Khoo also has a distinguished research career, specialising in the development and implementation of quantitative research methods in education. Dr Khoo is an international authority in student growth modelling. The new Assessment and Psychometric Research Division that she will lead consists of more than 70 staff undertaking research and development in the areas of psychometrics, quantitative research methods, assessment and reporting in the humanities and social sciences and in mathematics and science, and system-wide testing. Dr Khoo becomes Acting Head of Division until a permanent appointment is made.

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