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One in three tertiary students considers non-completion: AUSSE

A third of Australian and New Zealand tertiary students seriously consider leaving their institutions before graduation, according to results from a new study of student engagement conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and released on 24 April.

A representative sample of more than 25,000 students from 29 Australian and New Zealand universities participated in the latest cycle of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), conducted in 2008 – the largest and most advanced survey of its kind.

Results show that, on average, 33 per cent of tertiary students consider leaving their institutions before graduation. Further, according to the AUSSE report, this figure is an underestimate, as it excludes students who have already discontinued their study.

Universities have been very successful in engaging students into study. The findings underline the challenges that institutions face in engaging students through to graduation.

Field of education has a significant effect on students' 'early departure' intentions. Science and agriculture students are the most likely to remain engaged through to graduation. Architecture, education and creative arts students report being most likely to depart prior to degree completion.

Students from remote backgrounds, students with disabilities, international students, and Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Maori and Pasifik Islander students all report higher than average intentions of leaving study before completion.

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Students are significantly more likely to consider leaving for practical or financial reasons rather than due to the quality of education.

Engaging students in the overall educational experience, providing effective individual support, and setting high expectations, however, may induce students to complete their education.

The AUSSE report reveals that university staff members underestimate the extent of the problem. In 2008, while about one out of every three Australasian students seriously considered departing their institution before graduation, staff saw the number as closer to one in 10.

According to the AUSSE Director, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Hamish Coates, managing student engagement effectively is vital to enhancing student retention.

"The early departure rate varies from 22.0 per cent at one institution to 44.9 per cent at another. Clearly, these figures are serious, and carry relevance for students and institutions, for the professions and for the economy as a whole," he says.

"The results as a whole, however, suggest that by monitoring students' satisfaction, support and learning outcomes, higher education institutions can reduce early departure and set conditions that enhance educational success," Dr Coates said.

The full report, *Engaging Students for Success* is available on the AUSSE web page.

Reporting and comparing school performances

Nationally comparable data about school performances should be reported to the public, but should not be used to create league tables, according to a new paper from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The paper, *Reporting and Comparing School Performances*, has been prepared for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs to provide advice on national schools data collection and reporting for school evaluation, accountability and resource allocation.

Comparable data should be collected about schools' student backgrounds, student outcomes, numbers and qualifications of teachers, sources of funding, and amounts of fees paid by parents.

Education authorities and governments should use this data to monitor school performances and to identify schools that are performing unusually well or unusually poorly given their circumstances.

The data should also be reported publicly, so that parents and the public can make informed judgements about, and meaningful comparisons of, schools.

Parents need a wide range of detailed information about schools' outcomes so they can choose the right school for their children – but schools work to promote many different kinds of outcomes for their students.

Simplified comparisons of schools, such as league tables, ignore this broader context by restricting the range of information that can be provided. League tables also encourage 'rank order' interpretations that have been damaging to schools and students in the past, and focus attention on some aspects of schooling at the expense of other outcomes that are as important but not as easily measurable.

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It is popular in some parts of the world to adjust data to fit 'measures' of school performance and to report these measures publicly in league tables – but there are very sound technical and educational reasons why school measures of this kind should not be used for public reporting and school comparisons.

Instead, ACER proposes provision of information in the form of school profiles or comparisons of 'like' schools.

School profiles allow an almost limitless range of information to be presented, while still allowing schools to be sorted by factors such as geographic location, school fee structure or religious affiliation.

If schools are to be compared, a 'like-schools' methodologies allow parents, the public and education systems to compare outcomes for schools in similar circumstances.

Comparing only like schools would also allow measures of school performance to be reported without adjustment: factual data about a school, and not the results of secondary analyses and interpretations that are open to debate.

Vigilance is required to ensure that the public reporting of data does not have negative and unintended consequences for schools, such as from the reporting of the socio-economic backgrounds of students in a school, or of the financial circumstances of struggling, small schools.

Overall, however, if information is presented in a way that does not encourage ranking or identification of individuals, almost all school data could be reported publicly.

The full report, *Reporting and Comparing School Performances*, by ACER researchers Geoff Masters, Glenn Rowley, John Ainley and Siek Toon Khoo, is available for download from ACER's research repository

Pre-school must have educational focus, says UK early learning expert

Early childhood learning and school systems should promote young children's cognitive as well as social and emotional development and focus on improving transitions for young children, UK early childhood learning expert Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford, Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of London and President of the British Association for Early Childhood Education, told educators in a series of seminars for the Australian Council for Educational Research in March and April.

"Young children are learning all the time, and however implicit or hidden it may be, the content of this learning – the curriculum – is determined by the adults who care for them," Professor Siraj-Blatchford said.

"The notion of a totally free play environment in pre-school is a myth, but this does not mean that teaching and learning should be formal, it should be 'playful'," she said.

"Pedagogy and curriculum are two sides of the same coin, and every learning episode has both. Staff require good training in order to undertake this important work with very young children."

Approaches to early childhood learning have tended to distinguish between 'care' and 'education', a view Professor Siraj-Blatchford described as 'erroneous' saying "Social pedagogy in kindergarten must be reconciled with emerging demands for school readiness in order to enhance social justice."

Professor Siraj-Blatchford's research shows that effective early childhood education must include a strong educational focus, and that practitioners must have strong curriculum knowledge as well as knowledge of how young children learn within their social-cultural context.

The research found that children who attend an effective and higher quality pre-school have significantly better outcomes in mathematics and reading at the end of primary school than those who attend a low-quality pre-school or stay at home.

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"There is evidence of a continuing positive effect of attending effective pre-school on children's subsequent outcomes," Professor Siraj-Blatchford said.

"We know that children's reading at 10 is partly predicated on their vocabulary at three. Effective pre-school is vital, especially for disadvantaged children who might not always have a rich early learning environment at home. Working with parents is vital"

These findings have contributed to the development of England's national Early Years Foundation Stage, a statutory framework for the early learning and care of children from birth to five.

Australia's federal government is currently trialling its own Early Years Learning Framework.

Professor Siraj-Blatchford spoke at early learning state conferences conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research, together with Early Childhood Australia and Gowrie Victoria and Gowrie NSW, in Sydney on 26 March and Melbourne on 2 April.

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ACER UPDATE

Supply of and demand for HDR qualifications in Australia

ACER is the successful bidder for the Australian Government Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) project on the current and future supply of, and demand for higher degree by research (HDR) qualifications. The research will examine the current situation of people with HDR qualifications who are already in the workforce, identify factors that influence demand, and identify factors that influence supply of people with HDR qualifications. The project will be completed by the end of June. The Centre of Policy Studies at Monash University will provide input into the work.

Leading Lights of Learning

ACER Chief Executive, Professor Geoff Masters, will present Recommendations and Directions from the 'Masters' Review-Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Science in Queensland Schools'at a breakfast hosted by ACER's Brisbane office as part of its Leading Lights of Learning series on 27 May.

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