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Practise what we preach, says leadership study

Leaders are learning like students, according to a recent study of higher education leaders from around the country. The Learning Leaders in Times of Change survey, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, is a joint project of the University of Western Sydney and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The project surveyed more than 500 Australian higher education leaders from 20 institutions about the contexts and challenges they face and the key capabilities that underpin their work. Results of the survey were released on 30 June.

A key recommendation of the project is that universities should 'practice what we preach' by constructing leadership learning programs that model the approaches to learning that are now being advocated for use with higher education students. Professional development for leaders should use case-based and problem-based learning situated in the context of each particular role, and should foster targeted support networks for people working in the same role.

Leaders must become particularly skilled at not only identifying what changes must be made to keep up with the continuous movement in their operating context, but also at making sure these agreed changes are put into practice successfully and sustained.

Commenting on the study's findings, Professor Geoff Scott, Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Western Sydney and leader of the research said, 'Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas.'

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University leaders said they face mounting external pressure for radical change in the higher education sector. To implement change, leaders must learn to do new things. And how best do higher education leaders learn? According to the survey, leaders learn in the same ways as their students.

University leaders want to be taught in the same way they teach their students. The study found that exactly the same flexible, responsive, active, problem-based, just-in-time, just-for-me learning methods found to engage university students in productive learning in studies is what leaders report they want.

Dr Hamish Coates, Principal Research Fellow at ACER, said the project has played a valuable role in developing ACER's collaborative relationships with Australian universities.

"In collaboration with UWS, and with colleagues at all Australian universities, we've leveraged robust research methodologies and key insights from school research to shed light on this critical area of higher education," he said.

"The study is one of the largest of its kind so far, and we look forward to further developments, both in Australia and abroad."

The full report, *Learning Leaders in Times of Change: Academic Leadership Capabilities for Australian Higher Education*, by ACER researchers Dr Hamish Coates & Michelle Anderson and UWS academic Professor Geoff Scott, is available from the [Australian Learning and Teaching Council website](#)

The Learning Leaders in Times of Change project has developed a range of products to support an academic leadership capability framework for Australian higher education. In 2008 and 2009, UWS and ACER will convert key findings into an online Leadership Enhancement And Development Resource (LEADR) and pilot the software and approaches at a large number of institutions. Visit www.altc.edu.au for more information.

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English language skills assessment

ACER has developed a new test of English language skills designed to help Australian universities and TAFEs identify international students who may need support to develop their English-language skills to a sufficient level to cope with the demands of tertiary study.

The English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA) is a secure web-based test of English language proficiency that provides instant feedback to teaching staff on the nature of the teaching support required.

ELSA was developed under commission to assess the English language skills of tertiary students entering degree or TAFE courses.

ELSA includes units and items to test students' skills in reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary. Units and items are optional and the test can be tailored to suit an individual institution or course.

The entire test – including the writing components - is assessed online instantly. The test uses technology that allows students' writing samples to be assessed online through a system of electronic neural networking.

Because the test is administered and assessed entirely online, large numbers of students can be assessed quickly and simultaneously and with results generated instantly, in a simple and economical manner.

The test has been piloted successfully with three universities.

According to one of the developers of the ELSA, ACER Research Fellow Mark Butler, the test proved popular with students because it's quick, modern and student-friendly.

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“The questions and examples deal with issues that are relevant to students, such as rental increase, internet usage and mobile phones, and the students can sit the test in under an hour”, he said. “It’s a high-quality, low-cost, accurate snapshot of students’ English-language ability.”

Further information on ELSA is available from the ACER website at
<http://www.acer.edu.au/elsa/index.html>

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ACER UPDATE

Research Conference 2008

The Hon Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Education, Minister for Social Inclusion will deliver a special address at ACER's Research Conference 2008 "Touching the Future: Building skills for life and work" on Monday 11th August in Brisbane. Her address will focus on the connection between education, employment and social inclusion.

Research Conference 2008 takes place at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, from 10-12 August. Further information on the conference program and registration is available from the [conference website](#). Enquiries may also be directed to Margaret Taylor at ACER's Centre for Professional Learning by phone on 03 9277 5403 or by email to [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address](#).

New location for ACER Brisbane office

ACER's Brisbane office has relocated to Kelvin Grove from Spring Hill. The new premises include a shop where books and other products published and distributed by ACER Press are available for sale directly to the public. The new office and shop are located at 1/165 Kelvin Grove Road, Kelvin Grove, QLD 4059. Phone (07) 3238 9000 Fax (07) 3228 9001. The shop is open from 9.00am to 5.00pm weekdays.

Research Developments issue 19

Research Developments issue 19, Winter 2008 is now [available online](#). Articles in this edition explore school funding, Australia's performance in the 2006 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the recent Staff in Australia's School (SiAS) survey and outlines several of ACER's international projects. Print copies of *Research Developments* 19 will be distributed in mid August.

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