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## Schools First launched

ACER is a partner in *Schools First*, a new initiative to help build school-community partnerships. *Schools First* is a national initiative that aims to build stronger partnerships between schools and their local communities. *Schools First* will provide regional, state and national awards to schools to the value of \$15 million over the next three years.

The *Schools First Awards* have been developed by National Australia Bank and three not-for-profit organisations: ACER, Australia Cares, and the Foundation for Young Australians. National Australia Bank has committed to funding the awards and all operating costs for the program over the initial three years.

The primary objective of *Schools First* is to improve student outcomes – by recognising and strengthening the social networks that already exist between schools and their communities, and by encouraging new relationships and initiatives.

The awards program involves three stages: up to 60 regional awards, eight state/territory awards, and one national award. There will be two types of awards. Impact Awards will recognise effective school-community partnerships that can demonstrate successful outcomes. There will also be a smaller number of Seed Funding Awards that will recognise fledgling partnerships with great potential. In these cases the awards will provide initial funding to progress the collaboration.

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*Schools First is* open to every primary and secondary school in Australia. Potential partners could include small or large businesses, health providers, libraries, parents, local government bodies, Chambers of Commerce, retirement villages, Rotary, Apex, Lions clubs, other schools, TAFEs, universities, kindergartens, and child care centres. A school might even partner remotely with a community group via technology.

ACER developed the entry and judging criteria for the awards, will train the judges to ensure consistency in the assessment of schools' applications, and will provide customised feedback to schools. *Schools First is* intended to recognise and celebrate excellence in school-community partnerships. Applications for the awards are assessed on a number of criteria. In particular, schools must show that their partnership:

- has been set up to address an identified need or opportunity
- is well-planned and genuinely collaborative
- has been managed and implemented effectively
- has led to improved outcomes for students; and
- can be sustained.

The award criteria are based on research findings and have been developed by ACER with input from Australia Cares and the Foundation for Young Australians. The criteria have been piloted with a small number of teachers and principals from a range of schools.

The judging will be undertaken by a group of experienced educators with a deep understanding of schools, the award criteria and the goals of the *Schools First* program. Site visits will be made to each of the state/territory award-winning schools, enabling the assessors to verify the information provided in the applications.

The awards program will be supported by a series of 80 regional workshops to assist schools in developing their applications. Workshop facilitators will provide toolkits for participants including templates for planning partnership projects and examples of successful school-community partnerships. Principals, teachers, students, parents, local government, health organisations, local businesses, community leaders and interested citizens will be able to attend the workshops.

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Following the judging, schools will receive short customised reports about their applications, incorporating feedback from the assessors. These reports will help schools to identify what they are doing well and what they might do to further develop their community partnerships.

Visit the Schools First website <[www.schoolsfirst.edu.au](http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au)> for more information and to register your interest in the awards program.

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## Careers advice well received by students

A new study of young Australians' perceptions of the career advice received in secondary school has found that almost all students access career advice between Years 10 and 12 and believe the information provided met their individual needs.

The study, released by ACER on 7 October, concluded that a school's career advice program needs to encompass as many career advice activities as possible as students have different needs from career advice and these needs can change over time. Young people appear to appreciate a wider variety of activities in their career advice program as it may provide them with more opportunities to find a career they wish to pursue.

The study was based on information collected from a group of more than 8000 young Australians who had been 15-years-old in 2003. Most were in Year 10 at that time. Information on how much career advice they accessed and their perceptions of the usefulness of that advice was collected through annual phone interviews from 2003-2005.

The most common type of career advice activity was the distribution of written material and handouts. This was followed by a talk from the school's career advisor.

Some types of career advice were seen as more useful than others by students. In years 10, 11 and 12, an individual conversation with the career advisor was perceived as the most useful. Group discussion was seen as the least useful by students at all three year levels.

The report's authors concluded that a pleasing finding from this study is that career advice appears to be delivered equitably to students across all schools and within schools. Regardless of their background, students see career advice as useful and believe the advice they receive at school meets their particular needs.

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Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *Career Advice in Australian Secondary Schools: Use and Usefulness*, by Sheldon Rothman and Kylie Hillman. The study is research report number 53 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) with support from state and territory governments.

The report can be downloaded from the LSAY webpage

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## ACER prioritises ICT research agenda with new appointment

ACER has appointed Mr Gerry White to the newly-created position of Principal Research Fellow in the area of Research and Digital Learning. The appointment signals ACER's commitment to providing high quality research to support policy and practice in the use of technology in education.

"Digital learning is an increasingly high priority in schools, TAFE colleges and universities; it should be a high priority in educational research also. This appointment reflects ACER's intention to lead the research agenda in this developing area," said ACER's chief executive, Professor Geoff Masters announcing the appointment.

The new role will be located in ACER's Teaching, Learning and Leadership research program. Research Director of the program, Professor Stephen Dinham said he welcomed the appointment of such an experienced and well-regarded leader in the ICT field.

Mr White has been providing strategic advice to ACER about information and communication technology over the last year. His new role will expand on this work to pursue a digital learning research agenda.

Previously Mr White headed *education.au*, the Australian national information and communications technology agency for the education and training sector.

Research into digital learning will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of educational ICT, according to Mr White.

"The focus on research into digital learning is a vital step towards improving teaching and learning in the education system in Australia today," he said.

"Stakeholders such as schools, universities and education departments in this country realise the importance of digital learning, but until now there has been no national study of the depth and breadth of the effect of technology on education.

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“Choices about policy and practice in this area are currently made on hunches, because there is not yet enough evidence-based research to underpin innovative and intelligent decision-making. ACER plans to change that,” he said.

“We envisage that our research will be used to inform decisions about ICT use and deployment made by the school sector, universities and TAFE colleges, and other education stakeholders,” said Mr White.

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## ACER UPDATE

### CEET to hold 12th annual National Conference

The Centre for the Economics of Education & Training, a joint structure between ACER and Monash University, will hold its 12th National Conference on Friday 31 October 2008. The theme will be 'The expansion of education and training: Ensuring relevance, quality and inclusion.' The conference will be held at Ascot House, 50 Fenton St, Ascot Vale, Melbourne.

Speakers will include Tom Karmel, Peter Noonan, Chandra Shah, Gerald Burke, Phillip McKenzie, Fran Ferrier, Sue North, Rob Fearnside and Jack Keating. Further details are available from the [CEET website](#)

### Assessment and reporting of employability skills

The Minister for Education, Julia Gillard released a report by ACER that addresses the assessment and reporting of employability skills of senior secondary students on 17 October. The *Study into the Assessment and Reporting of Employability Skills of Senior Secondary Students*, was undertaken between July 2007 and January 2008. The main task in this project was to evaluate options for assessing and reporting each of eight employability skills against five criteria, and to recommend a preferred approach. The report, by Gabrielle Matters and David Curtis, is available from the [DEEWR website](#).

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## Why not the Best Schools?

*Why not the best schools? What we have learned from outstanding schools around the world*, by Brian Caldwell and Jessica Harris will be launched by Professor Glyn Davis AC, Vice-Chancellor, The University of Melbourne, on 30 October.

*Why not the Best Schools?* offers a ten-point, ten-year plan for an education revolution that will result in the transformation of Australia's schools. The book draws on a five-year study culminating in the International Project to Frame the Transformation of Schools conducted in Australia, China, England, Finland, the United States and Wales. There are 6 Case Study books, sold separately and. They are available online from [ACER Press](#)

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