

In this issue... ▶



## Improving learning for all



*Prof Geoff Masters AO  
is CEO of ACER.*

Improving learning has become a global priority thanks to the United Nations and its Sustainable Development Goal 4. Challenges may vary according to country context but the aim is universal: to provide the best education possible within each local system. **Geoff Masters** explains.

As in many countries, the national curriculum in Australia ties what a student is expected to learn to their year level. Teachers are expected to deliver the same year-level curriculum to all students and to assess and grade them on how well they perform. Attempting to lift performances by holding all students to the same expectation flies in the face of what we know about learning, and this is a problem.

Many students find the year-level curriculum is either well within their comfort zone or so far ahead of them that they are unable to engage with it meaningfully. Students enter each school year with widely different levels of attainment; the most advanced 10 per cent of students are about five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent. As a result, less advanced students often are not ready for, and more advanced students often are not adequately challenged by, the year-level curriculum.

People learn best when given learning opportunities at an appropriate level of challenge: beyond their comfort zone, but not so far beyond that they become frustrated and give up.

A review of the Australian curriculum in 2018 proposed redefining how we set learning expectations in schools. Instead of packaging the curriculum into year levels, wherever possible the curriculum would be presented as a sequence of increasing proficiency levels in a subject. Some interpreted this as requiring teachers to develop an individual learning plan for every student (impossible in practice) or as the abolition of year levels, which is unnecessary; there are often good social reasons to keep students of the same age together.

The concept of proficiency levels unrelated to age or year levels is familiar

in areas such as music and language learning and recognises that there are different levels of attainment within a student cohort.

The best teachers already understand that some students may be two or three years ahead of year-level expectations and others may be two or three years behind. Many currently work to ascertain where individuals are in their learning, and to teach accordingly, to meet students' differing learning needs and to ensure that every student is appropriately challenged.

### **Evidence-based teaching**

Improvements in student learning and educational outcomes depend on the wider use of reliable evidence in classroom practice. The concept of evidence-based practice has its origins in medicine, with the essential idea that decisions made by medical practitioners should be based on the best available evidence collected through rigorous research – ideally, through randomised controlled trials.

Evidence-based teaching similarly involves the integration of reliable, local, practitioner-collected evidence with evidence from systematic, external research. Policies and discussions of 'evidence-based teaching' sometimes overlook the importance of this broader, more integrated understanding of the role of evidence in teaching and learning.

Evidence-based teaching draws on evidence for three purposes:

- To ascertain the points individual learners have reached in their learning
- To inform effective teaching strategies and interventions
- To evaluate student progress and teaching effectiveness.

### **Looking ahead**

If we are serious about improving learning for all, it's time we recognised the importance of evidence from research and reconsidered current models of schooling. How appropriate are age-based curricula in a 21st century setting? Is this the best way to support teachers and students? Would success at school be better measured in terms of the progress learners make, regardless of their starting point, rather than the achievement of year-level benchmarks? The research evidence certainly seems to support this.

### **In this issue**

In this issue of *International Developments*, we summarise the research evidence gathered through our work and the impact our projects make around the globe. We recognise the region-specific education challenges and discover the global and national commitments of countries to address those challenges. We explore how ACER's technical assistance is supporting countries, especially developing countries, in strengthening their national assessment systems. The issue examines research on pedagogies, innovations that support knowledge sharing, and high quality assessments that are delivered online to meet the learning needs of individual students.

As many education systems, particularly in developing countries, are undergoing a transformation, our work promotes and supports the generation of evidence essential for improvements in the quality of education. ■

### **LINKS**

This article draws on original material by Professor Geoff Masters, AO published in [www.teachermagazine.com.au](http://www.teachermagazine.com.au) in 2018.