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Global economic crisis may affect education export

The current economic crisis has the potential to reverse, or at least slow down, the growth of international student numbers in Australia, according to a paper presented to the annual conference of the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) by ACER's Dr Phillip McKenzie in Melbourne on 31 October.

International education contributed \$12.5 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2007, up 17% since 2006. Education is the third largest export sector behind coal and iron ore. Universities rely on international student fees for about 15% of their funding. Around 18% of Australia's tertiary enrolments are by international students – well above the OECD average of 7%. Among the other OECD countries only New Zealand (16%), the United Kingdom (14%) and Switzerland (14%) come close to the Australian proportion.

Dr McKenzie, ACER Research Director, Transitions and Post-School Education and Training said the rapid deterioration in the world economic outlook in recent months probably poses even more risks for Australia than for other countries.

"Currency swings have recently been volatile, but if the current relative position of the Australian dollar is sustained for any length of time, this would have the effect of making Australia a more competitive destination for international students, provided other factors stay broadly the same," Dr McKenzie told delegates to the conference.

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"Despite this, the prospect of prolonged economic downturn raises questions about the prospective demand for education places, international students' capacity to finance their studies, and how national governments may respond."

The largest source countries for international students in Australia are China (22%) and India (14%).

"Economic and social developments in these countries are going to have the largest impact on international education enrolments in Australia," Dr McKenzie said.

International education in Australia may also be affected by the development of bilateral Free Trade Agreements between Australia and individual countries in the Asia-Pacific region and the initiatives of groups of countries such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit to strengthen educational cooperation.

"The Free Trade Agreements seem to have made only a modest contribution to the rapid growth in international trade in educational services. Most agreements have only recently been introduced, and their provision for education services is quite limited. However, their influence may grow, with large trading partners such as China and India now negotiating or considering a Free Trade Agreement with Australia," Dr McKenzie said.

CEET is a joint venture of Monash University - Faculty of Education and Faculty of Business and Economics - and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The Centre undertakes research, training, consultancies and dissemination on the economics and finance of education and training.

The 12th Annual CEET Conference was held in Melbourne on Friday 31 October at Ascot House, Ascot Vale, Melbourne. The theme of the conference was 'The expansion of education and training: Ensuring relevance, quality and inclusion.'

Further details on the conference are available from the CEET website at

<http://www.education.monash.edu.au/centres/ceet/conferences/>

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Declines in the study of science and mathematics confirmed

A new report released by ACER on 30 October confirms that Australia faces significant challenges in boosting participation in science and mathematics studies in school education, university studies and in the teaching workforce.

The report provides updated figures on:

- the performance of Australian school students in science and mathematics;
- participation in science, mathematics, and technology in the final year of secondary school;
- university participation in science and technology studies; and
- teachers, teaching and education in science, technology and mathematics.

Participation in senior secondary school science has declined over the 30 year period from 1976 to 2007. There is also evidence from every State and Territory of declines since the mid 1990s of participation in the advanced levels of studies in mathematics. These trends continue the declines noted from earlier periods.

Commenting on the findings, the report's lead author, ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr John Ainley, said strengthening science curriculum in school was a key to generating higher levels of participation in science-related studies at university.

"The content and process of science curriculum in secondary school needs to relate more strongly to the experience of young people and connecting what is studied in schools to the emergent fields of science such as biotechnology," Dr Ainley said.

"Stronger use of curriculum resources at primary school level is also required."

The report suggested that schemes to off-set Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) charges may provide an incentive to attract science graduates to teaching even if that is not always for a life-time career.

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The report was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to update and extend the Background Data and Analysis component of the 2003 report *Australia's Teacher's: Australia's Future – Advancing Innovation, Science, Technology and Mathematics* to include new data that have been published or become available since its publication.

The report, *Participation in Science, Mathematics and Technology in Australian Education*, by John Ainley, Julie Kos and Marina Nicholas is published as ACER Research Monograph 63. The full report is available from the [ACER website](#).

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Early school leavers take up education, training and employment

Only four per cent of 17 year olds in a recent Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) study had not completed Year 12, participated in an alternative vocational program or found full time employment.

The majority of those who did not complete Year 12 were fully engaged in employment, education or training (80 per cent of males and 58 per cent of females), according to the study released on 23 October.

Reports often focus only on Year 12 completion rates. This study followed those who left school before completing Year 12 and found that many went on to study in different settings such as TAFE colleges and apprenticeships.

"When TAFE courses and apprenticeships are considered alongside Year 12 completion rates, we have more young Australians completing Year 12 or a vocational equivalent than is sometimes thought," ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters said.

Earlier this year the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set a goal to lift the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate to 90% by 2020. The report's findings indicate TAFE courses and apprenticeships can make an important contribution to achieving that goal.

The study tracked 8,691 young people from 2003 when they were aged 15, until 2005. Those most likely to have left school early were low academic achievers, Indigenous young people, those from families where parents worked in blue-collar occupations or were not university-educated, those not living with both parents, those from non-metropolitan locations, those from government schools, males and those born in Australia.

"Since the 1980s there have been dramatic rises in the proportions of young people completing Year 12, and changes to the diversity of programs schools offer," Professor Masters said.

"A pleasing result during that time is that differences in early school leaving relating to gender and socioeconomic background have declined."

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Many young people did not have a realistic plan for achieving their career goals. Twenty percent of those nominating professional careers and one third of those planning trade occupations were intending to gain qualifications below the level typically required for their intended careers.

“It is important that we assist young people in gathering information about career opportunities and about the education and training pathways that are necessary to achieve career goals,” Professor Masters said.

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *School Non-completers: Profiles and Initial Destinations* by David D. Curtis and Julie McMillan. The study is research report number 54 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 UPDATE

VET advisory groups

ACER's Research Director, Transitions and Post-School Education and Training, Dr Phil McKenzie has been invited to represent ACER on two groups concerned with vocational education and training (VET).

The International Trades Fellowship Advisory Group group has been formed to advise the International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI) on its program to select trades people for overseas study to help address areas of 'skill deficiencies' in the workforce. ISSI administers the program under contract to DEEWR. The advisory group members include representatives of government, industry, VET providers and research.

The Transport Research Education Consortium group has been formed by the [Transport and Logistics Industry Skills Council \(TLISC\)](#) to support the development of programs that profile transport industry VET research, help identify transport industry education and training needs, and examine issues relating to skill shortages in the transport industry.

Beyond the classroom, building school networks

Beyond the Classroom, building school networks by Rosalyn Black from the Foundation for Young Australians and published by ACER will be launched on 18 November by Sam Lipski, Chief Executive of the Pratt Foundation.

The book discusses networks involving the school, parents, community and businesses and calls for new models of schooling that recognise that the future of young people is the responsibility of the whole community. These models should form the basis of a new social alliance across school systems enabling all young people to take an active – if not leading – role in that community, beyond the school gates. *Beyond the Classroom* is available through [ACER Press](#).

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