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## New standards for senior students

Earlier this year the Australian Council for Educational Research provided a report to the Australian Government on options for the introduction of an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE) for the final years of secondary school. Our report and an opportunity to comment on it are available at the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website.

The report proposes the introduction of an ACE based on national standards for what is taught in Years 11 and 12 and for how well students should be expected to learn what is taught. These standards are captured in three key recommendations.

Our first recommendation calls for national agreement on what should be taught. We argue that, regardless of where they live in Australia, students should be able to engage with school subjects in similar depth and with similar academic rigour. In individual subjects (such as Economics, Biology and Advanced Mathematics) we recommend the identification of a core of essential knowledge, skills, ideas and principles. These are the 'big ideas' that all students taking that subject should have an opportunity to learn regardless of the state or territory in which they live. Except in some vocational subjects, no systematic attempt has been made to do this.

In making this recommendation, we were not proposing that the entire curriculum for a subject should be the same across the country. Schools must be able to respond to local needs and circumstances and there is value in a degree of diversity in what and how students are taught and in opportunities for experimentation and innovation. But we believe that in most senior school subjects, students should have guaranteed access to an agreed core of essential content. And we suggested a number of subjects for which this work should be commenced.

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It is difficult currently to establish what is common across Australia because states and territories provide different levels of specificity in their syllabuses and curriculum frameworks. In smaller systems, which have limited resources for curriculum development and student assessment, teachers often are given only broad guides to what they should teach.

Our second recommendation calls for students throughout Australia to be assessed against the same standards. Currently it is not possible to compare achievements in a subject such as Accounting from one jurisdiction to another. There is no way of knowing whether a 'Band 6' performance in NSW represents a lower or higher level of achievement than a 'Very High Achievement' in Queensland, or a study score of 40/50 in Victoria. The different schemes used to report student results and the current lack of comparability were described to us as confusing and unnecessary.

We proposed the development of a set of national 'achievement standards' for senior school subjects. For any given subject, there might be five such standards (perhaps labelled E to A) with each standard describing and illustrating the kinds of knowledge and skills that students would have to demonstrate to achieve that standard. Some states already report in terms of subject standards. Our proposal is that national standards be developed to provide a common format for reporting results and a level of comparability that does not currently exist.

We stopped short of recommending the introduction of national Year 12 examinations. If results in a subject are reported in terms of the same set of achievement standards, then a level of comparability across jurisdictions will follow. Of course, to the extent that states and territories share examination and other assessment materials in a subject, this level of comparability will be improved.

Our third recommendation is that, to be awarded the ACE, students should be required to demonstrate acceptable levels of a few key capabilities: the ability to write in English; to read with understanding; to apply mathematical concepts to everyday problems; and to use computer technology. We made this recommendation because of claims that some students being awarded senior certificates have only limited mastery of these skills and because of research evidence that

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failure to master these basics (especially reading and writing) is correlated with poorer employment, health and social outcomes.

The focus of existing senior certificates is on how well students have learnt subject matter. Except in Queensland, there is no direct assessment of basic skills that underpin school subjects and that are essential to learning, work and life beyond school. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia have identified other 'employability skills' such as the ability to work as a member of a team and to plan and organise activities. Our report recommended further work to explore how these skills also might be assessed in a nationally consistent way as part of the ACE.

In the course of our work we found ourselves asking many questions about current senior secondary arrangements. For example, does Australia, with a smaller population than some American states, really require *nine* different senior certificates? Do we need seven distinct syllabuses/curriculum frameworks in a subject such as Physics, especially when these syllabuses are designed for essentially the same group of tertiary-bound students? At a time when the states of the European Union are working to make their qualifications more compatible and more comparable to increase the international competitiveness of European education, to encourage mutual recognition and to facilitate student mobility, can Australia afford to have senior secondary arrangements which are becoming increasingly disparate?

Our recommendations to the Australian Government envisage each state and territory in the future awarding the Australian Certificate of Education in place of its current senior certificate. But before this could happen, each certificate would have to guarantee access to essential curriculum content, assess students against common achievement standards, and require all students to demonstrate at least minimum levels of competence in literacy, numeracy and the use of technology. We believe an Australian Certificate of Education based on nationally established standards will provide students throughout Australia with a single internationally recognised senior secondary qualification.

Professor Geoff Masters is CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research.

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## Blueprint highlights eroding quality of childcare services

The NSW and Queensland Children's Services commissioners' 'Blueprint' for child care, *What about the kids? Policy directions for improving the experiences of young children in a changing world*, released last month, calls for policy improvements to support the care and education of all babies and young children.

The 'Blueprint' is welcome for highlighting the alarming developmental outcomes for many children under existing childcare and early development arrangements and the eroding quality of early childhood services.

For too long, calls to put children at the centre of the debate have been eclipsed by a focus on funding and provision issues. Certainly, increased provision for child care is important, but provision and quality must go hand in hand. Increasing threats to healthy development mean that children need more nurturing, better care and earlier education than at any time in the past.

To date, lack of coordinated planning for young children's care and education has resulted in the current child care "shambles". Planning and building child care centres has been left largely to the commercial sector. Family Day Care is dependent on mothers being willing to care for children in their homes and having a house that meets certain safety requirements.

Decades of research show the benefits of strong, rich early childhood programs on children's development and learning. All children need access to quality programs provided by qualified staff.

As pointed out in the Blueprint, quality childcare can be of particular benefit to families affected by poverty and disadvantage. In some disadvantaged communities, child care or preschool centres provide the only safe, consistent and thoughtful early childhood experiences that children have prior to starting school. They are the only places where children are fed properly and have access to early literacy experiences including drawing, painting and reading.

Quality early childhood programs also boost early development and learning and can help children reach key developmental milestones and close learning gaps.

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However, as the *Blueprint* highlights, the quality of early childhood programs is eroding. Early childhood services are in crisis. Costs have spiralled out of control, places are impossible to find in some areas and quality varies dramatically. There are also serious shortages of child care practitioners and early childhood teachers.

In reality, child care places will be in short supply until planning issues are addressed. Current processes of funding and building centres are way out of kilter with need and demand. But planning early childhood centres is no simple matter as population shifts and community needs change, as we have long seen in the school sector. Schools that once had a thousand children end up with a hundred or so enrolments and close.

The new Commonwealth plan to have all four year olds participate in an educational preschool program in the year before school has been widely applauded, but needs careful thought and planning. At present there is no way every child could be placed in a "preschool" education program with a qualified early childhood teacher. There are simply not enough early education "places" and early childhood teachers to go around. For a start, universities must immediately boost childhood teacher training if universal preschool for four year olds is to get off the ground in the next decade, let alone the next year or so.

There is no doubt that quality early childhood care and education is expensive. Child care fees already rival those of the most expensive independent schools. Imagine the cost increases if all child care centres as the *Blueprint* advocates also had to provide qualified early childhood teachers or child-staff ratios of one adult to three babies rather than the common one adult to five babies.

All children need quality early childhood programs if they are to thrive. Building "seamless" or integrated early childhood care and education programs won't be easy but it is necessary. Establishment and operational costs are high but the academic outcomes are more important than the high short term-costs to government, community and taxpayers.

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*What about the kids? Policy directions for improving the experiences of young children in a changing world*, is available online at the [NSW Commission for Children and Young People website](#).

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## ACER UPDATE

### **Indigenous education leadership forum**

ACER and the Victorian chapter of the Australian College of Educators are hosting a forum on Indigenous education leadership presented by Dr Chris Sarra, Director of the Indigenous Educational Leadership Institute. In the forum, entitled Stronger Smarter Strategies, Dr Sarra will present the success story of the Cherbourg School in Queensland where he was principal. A question and answer session about stronger, smarter strategies used in providing education for Indigenous children will follow. The forum will be held at ACER, 19 Prospect Hill Road Camberwell on Tuesday 25 July.

### **ACER Researcher takes out AUQF Best Paper prize**

ACER Research Fellow, Dr Hamish Coates, was awarded the Best Paper prize at the Australian Universities Quality Forum held in Perth early in July. Dr Coates's paper was entitled *Excellent Measures Precede Measures of Excellence*. The paper identified quantifiable indicators that might enhance the national evaluation of learning and teaching in higher Australian higher education including the possible development of new indicators. Dr Coates also took out the prize for best workshop at the forum in conjunction with Cindy Tillbrook, Executive Director, Graduate Careers Australia.

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## **Newly registered teachers in Victoria**

The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) has commissioned ACER to assist in the development of on-line questionnaires for the 2005 cohort of provisionally registered teachers, their mentors and their principals. The surveys will examine the operation of the processes of provisionally registered teachers being considered for full registration, including the nature and extent of the professional learning and collaboration that occurred as a result. ACER will also analyse the responses and prepare a report.

## **A review of teacher education for languages teachers**

The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has commissioned ACER to conduct a review of teacher education for languages teachers. The intention of the review is to obtain a comprehensive national picture of teacher education and retraining opportunities for languages teachers; determine the extent to which existing programs adequately prepare languages teachers; and develop strategies to improve access and quality in teacher education for languages teachers. The project will run from July 2006 to March 2007.

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