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International study reveals serious adult literacy and numeracy problems

Preliminary results from an OECD study released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in February reveal that many adult Australians do not possess the literacy and numeracy skills necessary to participate fully in modern life and work.

Called the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and developed with the support of the Australian Council for Educational Research, the study assesses adults in 25 countries in terms of proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in a technology-rich environment.

Mr David Tout, Senior Research Fellow at ACER and a member of the Numeracy Expert Group for PIAAC, said, 'The results of this study mean Australia still has much work to do in the area of workplace and vocational education and training (VET).'

The preliminary PIAAC results from 2011-12 show that about 7.3 million or 44 per cent of adult Australians achieved in the lowest two bands for literacy, while about 8.9 million or 55 per cent achieved in the lowest two bands for numeracy.

Of significance for employers and those in the VET sector, PIAAC also shows that 38 per cent of employed adults achieved in the lowest two bands for literacy, while 48 per cent achieved in the lowest two bands for numeracy.

'This is an alarming result for a country that needs to lift the skill levels of its population to ensure a healthy society and a robust economy,' Mr Tout said.

Mr Tout said a key issue is whether trainers, teachers and learner support staff in the VET sector themselves have the skills and tools to accurately identify the literacy and numeracy skills of their learners.

'A second key issue is whether, once identified, they have the skills, resources and time to actively develop learners' literacy and numeracy alongside their other competency based learning,' Mr Tout explained.

To address both key issues, ACER is bringing together evidence-based researchers with industry and training stakeholders at the annual National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference to build professional skills around the assessment of literacy and numeracy in VET in May.

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Mr Tout and ACER Research Director Ms Juliette Mendelovits will be speaking about PIAAC at the conference.

ACER's second annual National Adult Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference, addressing the theme 'Building on evidence to improve skills,' will be held at Ultimo College, Sydney Institute, on 9-10 May.

Further information on the conference is available at www.acer.edu.au/nallnac

Preliminary results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies study are available at www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4228.0main+features992011-2012

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Philanthropic support: a big knowledge gap for schools

Schools are relying on fetes and other types of traditional fundraising while missing out on the financial and 'in-kind' support available from philanthropic foundations and trusts, according to a survey by the Australian Council for Educational Research in partnership with The Ian Potter Foundation and the Origin Foundation.

The *Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy 2012 Survey Report* found schools, especially government schools, rarely connect with philanthropic trusts and foundations as part of their fundraising approach when seeking extra assistance for learners. Yet philanthropic organisations surveyed for the report had annual budgets earmarked for education grants ranging from \$521 to \$2.7 million last year.

The report examined philanthropy in education through a national survey of 61 philanthropic education grant making foundations and trusts, 359 government and non-government schools and 87 not-for-profit organisations working with schools.

'Many schools are "pressed up against the glass" and wondering what they are looking at when it comes to philanthropy in schooling,' said Dr Michelle Anderson, Principal Research Fellow in the Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation research program at ACER and co-author of the report with Dr Emma Curtin. 'A big knowledge gap for schools exists in this area. Philanthropy is a whole new world for nine out of 10 schools in Australia.'

Although the LLEAP surveys are not designed to be comparative from year to year, Dr Anderson said a noticeable trend is that philanthropic organisations wish to engage more directly with education, particularly working in collaboration with schools and not-for-profits around common areas of need for children and young people.

The LLEAP 2012 Survey Report also found that:

- unfriendly tax laws limited the potential for many philanthropic foundations and trusts to make grants directly to schools, while few schools have established funds, such as a scholarship fund, to maximise their potential fundraising – a mere seven per cent of schools had a scholarship fund, while 43 per cent of philanthropic organisations surveyed said they could support bursaries and scholarships
- student engagement was identified as a top priority by all schools, philanthropy and not-for-profits, while 'material assistance' is a top three priority across all three groups
- schools, philanthropy and not-for-profits support the Gonski Review's recommendation to create a national fund to improve philanthropy in schooling to build greater capacity for working with schools and improve the coordination of information through a 'one-stop-shop' repository, but all raised concerns that any such national fund should not constrain innovation and local decision making about how funds were spent.

The LLEAP 2012 Survey Report Executive Summary is available at

http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/LLEAP_ExecSummary_Survey_Report2012.pdf

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Mature student admissions in England

An assessment developed by ACER to facilitate the selection of mature-age students for university study is set to be used in England for the first time.

ACER will this year pilot the Mature Students Admissions Pathway (MSAP) at the University of Salford, Manchester.

MSAP provides prospective students who are not recent school leavers, and who now have a very different current capability, with an opportunity to gain entry to university. It tests candidates' abilities to understand and analyse material, to think critically about issues, and to organise and express their thoughts in a logical and effective way.

The University of Salford will use MSAP as part of a wider program to address mature student admissions. The program will begin with a pre-test workshop designed to reassure candidates about the test. A post-test 'bridging' program for those who have passed the test will then provide support between offer and registration, alleviating anxiety about attending university and facilitating peer support, including providing an opportunity for them to 'buddy' with current mature students.

Under this model, MSAP and the pre-test workshop will help ensure that students accepted into university have the capacity to succeed, while the bridging program will help prevent attrition by supporting students in their transition to higher education. Those who are not offered a place will receive assistance from the university on other pathways available to them.

MSAP has been used in Ireland since 2009 and is based on the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT), developed and implemented by ACER in Australia since 1992.

Aptitude tests such as MSAP and STAT have been recognised for providing consistent and unbiased performance measures across demographic subgroups, because such tests are designed to measure each student's ability to analyse information and think critically, rather than testing knowledge of a specific subject area.

Of course, there is a distinction between 'ability' and 'achievement'.

'Aptitude tests such as MSAP and STAT are designed to identify individuals who have the capacity to undertake university study, rather than predict levels of achievement at university,' notes ACER's STAT and MSAP project director, Ms Susan Nankervis. 'A wide range of factors, not just ability, influence student achievement at university.'

A report on the findings from the first national Australian study on the validity of STAT, conducted by Dr Hamish Coates and Tim Friedman at ACER and published in the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* in March 2010, found that STAT's estimates of first-semester performance are comparable to those linked with final-year secondary school achievement. In other words, STAT is able to predict students' university success at least as well as Year 12 scores are able to predict students' success.

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As MSAP is based on the same principles as STAT, this study suggests that these aptitude tests are a reliable and efficient alternative to Year 12 scores that ensure students who are capable of success at university are able to gain admission.

The University of Salford will pilot their mature student admissions program with their 2013 intake to the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work; the School of Computing, Science and Engineering; the School of Built Environment and a small number of programs within the School of Media, Music and Performance, with a full launch across the university for their 2014 intake.

Further information about MSAP is available from msap.acer.edu.au

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ACER Update

Last chance to attend Excellence in Professional Practice Conference

Registrations for the inaugural Excellence in Professional Practice Conference, on the theme 'Teaching the Australian Curriculum: Excellence and innovation in the classroom', are closing soon.

The conference draws together teachers from across Australia to share their professional practice and expertise, and learn from one another about best practice in teaching the Australian Curriculum from classrooms across the country.

ACER Chief Executive Professor Geoff Masters, ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Hilary Hollingsworth and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Chief Executive Robert Randall will deliver keynote presentations. Other presenters and their topics include:

- 'The Deadly Medley: Pooling our talents to embrace Indigenous teachings', Evan Willis, Pullenvale State School, QLD
- 'A New Curriculum: A new beginning', Yvonne Patterson, Gray Primary School, NT
- 'Using National Teaching Standards to Drive Curriculum Development', Daniel Buttacavoli and Sean Collins, Emmanuel College, VIC
- 'ICT Capability: It's (not) about the device', Phil Callil: President Victorian IT Teachers Association
- 'Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia Cross Curriculum Capability', Dr Eeqbal Hassim & Pamela Stewart, Asia Education Foundation

The Excellence in Professional Practice Conference takes place on the Gold Coast on 17 and 18 March, 2013. Further information is available from www.acer.edu.au/eppc

Research Developments online

ACER last year determined to replace the print edition of Research Developments, after 14 years, with a free, online-only magazine, coming in May. [Subscribe](#) to Research Developments.

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