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Measuring and rewarding school improvement

There is now a widely held view that the most effective strategy for improving countries' educational performances is to improve the day-to-day work of schools.

ACER chief executive Professor Geoff Masters was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to provide advice on the best ways to measure school improvement, and on the approaches announced in the Australian Government 'Reward for School Improvement' initiative.

In 2010 the Australian Government announced a *Reward for School Improvement* initiative. Under this initiative, between 2015 and 2020, rewards totalling \$388 million will be provided to schools that deliver the greatest improvements across a range of areas, including school attendance; literacy and numeracy performance; Year 12 attainment and results; and post-school destinations, such as the number of students going on to further education, training or work.

ACER chief executive, Professor Geoff Masters, was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to provide advice on the best ways to measure school improvement, and on the approaches announced in the *Reward for School Improvement* initiative.

The initiative proposes that schools meriting reward payments will be identified using 'a transparent school improvement methodology' based on an analysis of national data and school self-evaluations. Clear metrics are to be used to identify the amount of improvement achieved by each school.

Professor Masters suggests caution in introducing outcomes-based incentive schemes, recommending that, if rewards are to be provided, they must be tied to matters over which schools have direct control. He said they must make transparent the relationship between rewards and the work of schools and promote highly effective, evidence-based practices. In particular, he warned that the basis of rewards cannot be obscure, 'black-box' manipulations of outcome measures to produce rank orders of schools.

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'If schools are left wondering why some schools received rewards and others did not, then the credibility of any reward scheme is likely to be undermined,' Professor Masters said.

Professor Masters therefore recommends the use of 'practice-based' measures of school improvement to complement 'outcomes-based' measures. The difficulty, he notes, is that there are currently no agreed practice-based measures of school performance or improvement.

'Good measures of the core work of schools are not yet available – for example, the quality of classroom teaching or the quality of school leadership,' Professor Masters said. 'The development of better practice-based measures is essential if discussions of school improvement are to move beyond debates about test scores and their statistical adjustment.'

According to Professor Masters, the *Reward for School Improvement* initiative presents an opportunity – and a challenge – to support and promote improvements in school practices more directly than is possible by holding schools accountable for outcomes alone. To do this, evidence concerning the work of schools would have to be judged reliably so that conclusions about schools' performances and improvements are credible, fair and comparable across schools.

Professor Masters proposed some key principles that should underpin the *Reward for School Improvement* initiative, and identified a number of issues that need to be addressed. For information on these principles and issues read the full report, *Measuring and Rewarding School Improvement*, by Professor Geoff Masters.

The full report is available from: <http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/REVISED-REPORT-Measuring-and-Rewarding-School-Improvement-April-2012.pdf>

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400 000 university students to have their say

Around 400 000 students from 40 universities are set to have their say on core aspects of their university experience, in what will potentially be Australia's largest ever survey of higher education, which opened in July.

The University Experience Survey (UES) is being conducted to help universities and government learn more about students' experiences at university, and how they can improve teaching and learning.

First-year and final-year students will report on how active and engaged they are in learning, the support they experience from teachers and universities, and the degree to which they develop skills and knowledge.

The UES is an Australian Government initiative to help ensure ongoing improvement in the quality of learning and teaching in Australian universities. The survey focuses on aspects of the student experience that are measurable, linked with learning and development outcomes, and for which universities can reasonably be assumed to have responsibility.

The Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education appointed a consortium led by ACER to administer the 2012 UES.

ACER's Higher Education Research Director, Associate Professor Hamish Coates, said the survey is a powerful tool for both universities and students.

'A lot of research and development work has gone into the survey to ensure that it can provide valid, reliable and generalisable information to inform ongoing improvement in the quality of learning and teaching in Australian universities,' Associate Professor Coates said.

The survey is being administered online to a sample of first-year and final-year students, including domestic and international onshore students, in all 37 public institutions as well as in participating private institutions.

Students selected to participate in the UES will be contacted between July and September. Their involvement will help inform student choice, as results may be published on the My University website.

A report on the 2012 survey is due for release in December. The report will include a strategy for using the UES for the purposes of international benchmarking, as well as detailed discussion of results and any other significant findings emerging from the research.

In addition to the project report, the consortium will prepare and provide detailed diagnostic and benchmarking reports for each participating institution. National and institution-specific data sets will also be produced.

For further information visit: www.acer.edu.au/ues

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Australia achieves above OECD average tertiary participation

Australia's higher education is more accessible than in many other OECD countries, especially when age is considered, according to a research briefing paper released by ACER.

The ACER *Joining the Dots* research briefing paper also revealed that Australia's relatively high bachelor degree attainment levels are now above the OECD average. This is a recent phenomenon compared with other nations that have been achieving higher attainment for a number of generations.

'The Australian Government has set ambitious targets for its higher education system, aiming to substantially broaden and improve it by increasing participation and transforming funding arrangements. This move is beginning to bear fruit,' said Dr Daniel Edwards, ACER Senior Research Fellow and co-author of the research briefing paper.

Dr Edwards said higher participation has been achieved despite the fact that, as a proportion of GDP, Australian expenditure on tertiary education has been in decline for the past two decades.

'We need to keep in mind that declining expenditure on tertiary education could have adverse consequences down the track,' he added.

The research briefing paper, titled 'Australia in context: an international perspective on our higher education system', also makes the following observations:

- Individuals across a broader range of ages access higher education in Australia than in many other OECD countries
- Higher education increases employment prospects, and the impact of financial downturns is smaller for higher education graduates than others, and
- While women are accessing higher education at a much greater rate than men in Australia, female graduates have lower salaries relative to male graduates. This is particularly marked at higher levels of qualification. This outcome is not a feature of many other developed nations.

Dr Edwards added that in terms of employment access and remuneration, there remain obvious gender differences in Australia, with women appearing to have less favourable outcomes when compared with men who have similar qualifications.

'While Australia is not alone on this point, the fact that the discrepancy in earnings between men and women is larger among the more highly qualified cohort is of concern and is not replicated in a number of other countries,' Dr Edwards said.

Joining the Dots is a subscription-based resource provided by ACER to those with an interest in Australian higher education. Details for subscriptions are available at www.acer.edu.au/jtd or by emailing [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address.](mailto:info@acer.edu.au)

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Re-modelling special education

A Melbourne school is a pioneer and international leader in the field of special needs education, according to a new ACER Press book launched in July by Victoria's Minister for Education, the Hon Martin Dixon.

An Extraordinary School: Re-modelling special education tells the story of Port Phillip Specialist School, an innovative school catering for children aged two to eighteen years with a wide range of severe disabilities.

The book's editor, award-winning foreign correspondent and mother of a child at the school, Sara James, explains the school's point of difference is its three-pronged approach to education. It uses:

- a full-service school model, in which a wide range of educational, medical, paramedical and mental health services operate collaboratively within the school;
- an integrated model of service delivery, in which teachers, art, music and drama therapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, hydrotherapists, physiotherapists, social workers and psychologists collaborate to address the specific needs of each student, embedding therapy in all classroom activities, and;
- a visual and performing arts curriculum that uses dance, drama, music and the visual arts to teach literacy, numeracy and living skills.

'This model of education is unique to Port Phillip Specialist School, but it shouldn't be,' Ms James said.

'Port Phillip Specialist School sets a model of best practice that could and should be used in special schools across Australia and throughout the world. It also could be adapted for use in mainstream classrooms,' she said.

Ms James said Port Phillip Specialist School is successful because the entire staff works closely with parents and carers to educate the whole child. State-of-the-art facilities include a \$2.3m performing arts centre, a 10-metre swimming and hydrotherapy pool, and a house where students practice independent living skills.

Port Phillip Specialist School sets high standards for their students but ensures all goals are realistic, attainable and measurable. The school teaches important skills that will improve students' quality of life, ability to learn and ability to be independent.

'The goal at Port Phillip Specialist School is to help children and their families not just to cope, but to thrive,' Ms James said.

The book aims to change how the world approaches education for children with special needs and to show the value of the arts in the education of all children.

There are over 400 special schools in Australia, educating around 20 per cent of the 150 000 students with special educational needs or a disability who are enrolled in schools nationally. The other 80 per cent are enrolled in mainstream schools.

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An Extraordinary School: Re-modelling special education (ACER Press, 2012) was launched at Port Phillip Specialist School on Thursday 19 July. Print copies can be purchased from the [ACER Online Shop](#) or by contacting customer service on 1800 338 402 or via email on [. \(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](#)

[Listen](#) to an interview with *An Extraordinary School* editor, Sara James, and Port Phillip Specialist School Director of Integrated Services, Dr Carl Parsons, on ABC radio.

[Watch](#) an interview with *An Extraordinary School* editor, Sara James, on Network Ten's *The Circle*.

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Focus on university teaching to maintain student learning standards

University academics need to be prepared for teaching if universities are to maintain high standards during the expansion and diversification of the higher education sector, according to a new book published by ACER Press.

University Teaching in Focus: A learning-centred approach, co-edited by the University of Western Australia's Professor Lynne Hunt and Professor Denise Chalmers, was launched at the conference of the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) in Thailand in July.

'University students need well qualified teachers who challenge them to think and understand differently,' said Professor Hunt.

'Universities have a responsibility to facilitate students' learning in diverse cultural, political and economic environments,' she said.

The student population is expanding and becoming more diverse, and academic standards for entry into university courses are changing as a result of the Australian Government's university attainment targets and the removal of caps on student placements. The additional teaching workload may be taken up by new academics and sessional staff, many of whom have had no teaching training.

'Academics will need support to enhance their teaching if standards of student learning are to be upheld,' said Professor Chalmers. 'Universities and governments throughout the world increasingly require university teachers to undertake qualifications and professional development programs to prepare them for their teaching roles.'

University Teaching in Focus is designed as a textbook to support these teaching development programs, and outlines practical ways that university academics can enhance their teaching.

Written by 22 international experts in higher education, *University Teaching in Focus* provides university teachers with strategies to engage students in lifelong learning, extend their capacity to solve problems, enter the workforce, understand their discipline and interact positively with others in a global community throughout their professional lives.

The book covers:

- effective classroom teaching and developing graduate attributes;
- curriculum and assessment;
- online, problem-based and work-integrated learning;
- inclusive teaching and teaching international and Indigenous students, and;
- quality assurance and leadership processes.

Lynne Hunt is Emeritus Professor at the University of Southern Queensland and Adjunct Professor at the University of Western Australia. Denise Chalmers is Winthrop Professor and Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Western Australia.

Published July 2012

University Teaching in Focus (ACER Press, 2012) was launched by ICED President, James Wisdom, at the ICED Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, on Monday 23 July. Print copies can be purchased from the [ACER Online Shop](#) or by contacting customer service on 1800 338 402 or via email on [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address.](#)

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ACER Update

Realising the power of professional learning: whole school improvement seminar

ACER Institute is hosting a *Leading Thinkers* seminar on professional learning as an essential element for whole school improvement and creating better outcomes for all students. The seminar, presented by New Zealand education expert, Professor Helen Timperley, will draw on a 10 year research and development project in over 300 schools that have demonstrated substantial and consistent improvements in student achievement. The seminar is being held in Melbourne on 7 August, in Brisbane on 23 August and in Sydney on 24 August 2012. Further information is available on the [ACER Institute website](#).

Principal for a Day

Time still remains for Victorian business and community leaders to register to become a *Principal for a Day* on Wednesday 22 August 2012. *Principal for a Day* is a collaboration between schools and their communities that aims to increase and strengthen relationships, based on knowledge and understanding, between the private sector and education. It is a unique opportunity for business and community leaders to shadow a school principal to gain a first hand behind-the-scenes experience of the strengths and challenges facing our schools every day.

Principal for a Day is a joint partnership between ACER and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and has been running in Victoria since 2001. Schools and community and business leaders interested in participating can obtain more information from www.acer.edu.au/pfad or by contacting Ms Viv Acker on 03 9277 5617 or email [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address](#).

Inclusive literacy interventions forum

ACER and children's development organisation Plan Australia are hosting a forum for researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in the field of inclusive education to consider inclusive literacy interventions in the Australian and international development arenas.

Focusing on how inclusive literacy interventions can support the most marginalised children, the forum will include case studies from South Africa, Papua New Guinea and Indigenous Australia. Deputy Executive Dean of the College of Education at the University of South Africa, Professor Veronica McKay, will deliver a keynote presentation on the development of a South African school workbook development project that currently provides 'lesson-a-day' learning materials in all official languages for approximately six million children.

The forum, *Literacy and the most Marginalised Children: A Dialogue on Australian and International Experience*, takes place at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne on Tuesday 11 September 2012. For further information please contact [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address](#).

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Research Conference 2012

School Improvement: What does the research tell us about effective strategies?

ACER's annual research conference will take place at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour, from 26-28 August 2012. Further information including registration details, the conference program and a list of speakers is available from www.acer.edu.au/research-conference. Enquiries may be directed to Margaret Taylor by phone to 03 9277 5403 or by email to [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address](mailto:margaret.taylor@acer.edu.au).

Higher education student engagement conference

ACER and the LH Martin Institute are co-hosting the 2012 National Student Engagement Conference, on the topic 'Enhancing retention and outcomes in a competitive environment'. The conference will bring together stakeholders from across the sector to discuss how Australian tertiary education can assure and enhance students' engagement in effective educational practices to boost quality and productivity.

The 2012 National Student Engagement Conference takes place in Melbourne on 30-31 October. Two half-day pre-conference workshops will address using technology to engage students and using student voice data for change. Further information, including a list of speakers and registration details, is available from: www.acer.edu.au/highereducation/courses-and-conferences/

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Australian Council for Educational Research
Private Bag 55, Camberwell, Victoria Australia 3124
Tel: + 61 3 9277 5555
Fax: + 61 3 9277 5500
Web: www.acer.edu.au