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Initial findings from International Civics and Citizenship Education Study released

Initial findings from the largest international study on civic and citizenship education ever conducted were released in Gothenburg, Sweden on 29 June.

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) involved more than 140,000 Grade 8 students in more than 5,000 schools from 38 countries. The main survey was conducted in 2008 in southern hemisphere countries and 2009 in the northern hemisphere.

While Australian students did not participate in the study, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) acted as the International Coordinating Centre for the study. ACER worked with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in the United Kingdom and the Laboratorio di Pedagogia sperimentale (LPS) at the Roma Tre University in Italy, to conduct the study under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr John Ainley acted as project coordinator and Dr Wolfram Schulz as research director.

The study aimed to determine how well prepared students are to be citizens in a fast-changing world and how much they have learned about civics through their formal education. It reports on student knowledge and understanding of civics and citizenship as well as student attitudes, perceptions and activities related to civics and citizenship.

A report on the initial findings was launched by Seamus Hegarty, IEA Chairman, at a media conference streamed live on the internet. The study's initial findings include:

- Different approaches to civic and citizenship education are evident in the participating countries. These approaches include providing a specific subject, integrating relevant content into other subjects and including content as a cross-curricular theme.

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- Students from Finland, Denmark, Korea and Chinese Taipei showed the strongest results in civic knowledge.
- Substantial gaps in achievement were found between the higher and lower achieving countries as well as within countries.
- In almost all countries, girls outperformed boys in their knowledge and understanding of civics.
- Fifteen participating countries had taken part in a previous IEA study of civic education – known as CIVED – in 1999. In seven of those 15 countries there has been a significant decline in civic content knowledge since 1999. In only one (Slovenia) has there been a significant increase.
- On average about 60 percent of students across participating countries expressed trust in their national governments, the media and people in general, whereas 75 per cent of students had at least quite a lot of trust in schools.
- Political parties were typically the institution least trusted and on average half of the students did not express any preference for a political party.

A strong endorsement of gender equality was found. However, females were more supportive of gender equality than males in all participating countries.

Speaking at the launch the study's research director Dr Wolfram Schulz of ACER stressed that the study was about more than creating international league tables of achievement.

"Ranking countries is just one aspect of the study to allow for comparisons between countries," he said.

"The comparative nature of the study provides insights and identifies patterns that are not obvious from national surveys."

Dr Schulz noted that the study had collected rich datasets that will allow further reports and analyses over time, not only by those who conducted the study but by other researchers as well.

"We are very optimistic that further interesting results will come out of this study," Dr Schulz said.

The report, Initial Findings from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, is the first in a planned series of reports from ICCS. This initial report will be followed later this year by an extended report and detailed analysis of student knowledge and attitudes. There will also be three regional reports for Asia, Europe and Latin America focused on their specific civic and citizenship issues.

Further information about ICCS, including the report on initial findings, can be found at

<http://www.iea.nl/icces.html>

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ACER submission to NAPLAN inquiry

In its submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing, ACER says planned developments of this testing program will almost certainly enhance its value. ACER also argues that steps should be taken to minimise the misuse of NAPLAN results and to protect and promote the test's diagnostic benefits and potential. The submission also makes suggestions regarding the My School website.

The introduction of the NAPLAN tests in 2008 followed considerable work over a number of years to replace the various State and Territory literacy and numeracy testing programs with a single, national assessment providing comparable national results. According to the ACER submission, NAPLAN testing now plays an important role in efforts to ensure that all Australian students master essential literacy and numeracy skills.

The ACER submission identifies a number of ways in which the NAPLAN tests could be enhanced in the future. Firstly, measures of average student growth can now be reported for schools, education systems and nationally, as Year 5, 7 and 9 students in 2010 were assessed in Years 3, 5 and 7 in 2008.

Secondly, the precision with which some students' literacy and numeracy levels are measured could be improved. Currently all students in the same year level are administered the same test, so some students are taking tests that are too difficult or too easy for them. The achievement of these students could be measured with greater precision if they were administered a test better matched to their current levels of literacy and numeracy development.

It also may be possible to increase the diagnostic power of NAPLAN for teachers, through linked online assessments that 'drill down' to explore individuals' skills and understandings in more depth.

The ACER submission identifies some challenges for NAPLAN, including raising awareness of the uncertainty surrounding individual NAPLAN scores, mean NAPLAN scores and measures of growth. Consumers of test results are generally unfamiliar with the measurement error of NAPLAN scores.

Another challenge is minimising inappropriate coaching for NAPLAN. Given the importance of literacy and numeracy to the curriculum and to life beyond school, and given the proportions of students failing to meet minimum standards, it may be desirable for some schools to spend more time ensuring that all students master these basics. However, there are limits to how much time schools should give to literacy and numeracy teaching and test preparation. These limits are a matter of professional judgement and the vast majority of teachers and principals are very capable of making these judgements. Nevertheless, it may be necessary to monitor how schools are responding to NAPLAN and to provide advice and guidelines of appropriate forms of test preparation.

A final challenge is ensuring that the benefits of the diagnostic information becoming available through NAPLAN are broadly understood and appreciated. Opponents of standardised testing often point to experiences overseas without acknowledging the very different testing programs and educational circumstances that operate in other countries.

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The ACER submission also provided comment on the My School website, and argued that many of the current concerns are likely to be addressed by broadening the range of information provided and increasing levels of user choice. The My School website, in its early stage of development, currently provides a relatively narrow range of information about schools, with a focus on student performance measures.

The emphasis on NAPLAN is giving rise to concerns that schools may overemphasise literacy and numeracy in their teaching and that the original, diagnostic purposes of NAPLAN may be undermined through its use as an indicator of school performance. Part of the response to this concern may be to add, over time, other measures of student performance alongside NAPLAN measures.

My School currently evaluates school performances using school means. There are other ways of evaluating a school's performance: for example, in terms of the amount of progress students make between Year 3 and Year 5 or between Year 7 and Year 9. Measures of growth provide a better basis for evaluating a school's performance than school means which can reflect influences over which schools have little or no control.

In the opinion of ACER, improvements also are needed to the basis for defining schools with statistically similar student intakes. ACER has been invited by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to provide input into the consideration of ways to make these ongoing improvements.

There may also be value in allowing users to choose the kinds of comparisons they wish to make. For example, each school's results could be presented without comparison, accompanied by a menu of possible comparisons such as: comparison with all schools in same State/Territory; all schools in same sector; or schools with similar student intakes.

The Senate Inquiry is due to report in August 2010.

ACER has been involved in the NAPLAN tests through aspects of test development, marking and data analysis. ACER CEO Professor Geoff Masters is a member of the My School working party convened by ACARA to provide advice on the future development of this site.

ACER's submission is available from the inquiry website at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/naplan/submissions.htm

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Engaging individual students key to tertiary quality

Differences between students are as important as average levels of student engagement, according to an international expert on student engagement.

When assessing the quality of education at their institution, Australian universities must not look solely at average results from student engagement surveys but also focus on the different experiences among students, Professor Alexander McCormick told the National Student Engagement Forum on July 7.

Professor McCormick, Director of the United States National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), delivered the keynote presentation at the forum co-hosted by La Trobe University and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The forum focused on how information gathered from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) and its American equivalent can be used to improve the quality of higher education.

AUSSE, the largest survey of current higher education students in Australia and New Zealand, is a collaboration between ACER and participating universities. The 2009 AUSSE involved more than 30,000 students from 35 higher education institutions. A public report on the results was released by ACER in May. Over 50 institutions and 300,000 sampled students and teaching staff are participating in the 2010 collection, demonstrating Australia's commitment to enhancing learning and outcomes.

According to McCormick, the information gathered by student engagement surveys such as AUSSE can be used by institutions to set standards and improve quality; however results are also commonly used to compare institutions to their peers.

McCormick expressed concern that that survey results can be over-simplified if the focus is just on comparing the average result of one institution to another.

"Most of what we know from our research is that there is far more variation within institutions than there is between institutions," he said.

A US study of student engagement recently found that less than 10 per cent of the variation of results is attributable to the institution.

"To focus solely on the differences between institutions is like just looking at the tip of the iceberg," McCormick said.

"The tendency to look at averages and mean scores implies that all students feel the same... however the student experience is highly variable within our institutions."

To highlight the importance of examining the internal variation of survey responses, McCormick used results from the US student engagement survey to demonstrate that an institution with a high average rating could have a range of individual student results extending below the average rating of the lowest ranked institution.

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With this in mind, McCormick encouraged institutions to focus on the least-engaged students.

He said that student engagement pays bigger dividends for under-represented groups and for under-prepared groups such as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. US research suggests that, for these students, improved engagement levels result in better outcomes, including higher grade point averages.

This is all part of the challenge that McCormick identifies as the difference between 'participation' in a student engagement survey such as AUSSE and 'use' of the results.

"Gathering information is the first and easiest step in using a student engagement survey to improve the quality of higher education," he said.

McCormick recommended that institutions extend survey results with targeted inquiry, using focus groups and staff surveys. Strategies to unite interest and focus attention are also important in the quest to improve the quality of higher education.

"Student engagement isn't just like a light switch," McCormick said. "It's not something that an institution can simply turn on then adjust the dimmer."

McCormick said there are several dimensions and factors to the idea of engagement. Student engagement requires involvement with teaching staff. Rather than just memorising and regurgitating facts, there must be challenging academic work that encourages the development of higher-order thinking skills. There must also be active and collaborative learning practices such as learning communities, as well as powerful educational experiences such as study abroad programs.

For McCormick, engagement is the intersection of decisions made by institutions, staff and students. Engagement reflects choices made by institutions and teaching staff such as priorities, incentives, activities, requirements and structures. It also reflects student choices because ultimately, students have to make the decision to invest their time and effort into their studies.

According to McCormick, the time and energy students devote to their studies is the best predictor of their development.

In the United States, where the student engagement survey has been in place since 2000, a new study led by McCormick suggests emerging trends of improved survey results across a range of higher education institution types.

The early findings suggest that strong top-tier leadership, committed staff leadership and involvement, and institution-wide commitment to quality were linked to improved student engagement.

McCormick will next head a grant-funded study to expand analysis of the trends identified in their pilot study.

For more information on the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), visit <http://ausse.acer.edu.au>

A version of this article was published in Campus Review on 19 July 2010 and can be read at <http://www.campusreview.com.au/>

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Schools First awards closing soon

Schools have just one more week to submit their applications for a Schools First Award with applications closing at 5.00pm (AEST) on Friday, 30 July 2010.

ACER is a partner in Schools First, a national initiative that aims to build stronger partnerships between schools and their local communities. This awards program rewards excellence in existing school-community partnerships and encourages excellence in new partnerships.

The primary objective of Schools First is to improve student outcomes by recognising and strengthening the partnerships that already exist between schools and their communities, and by encouraging new relationships and initiatives. Schools First offers regional, state and national awards with a prize pool of more than \$5 million each year for three years. Any school in Australia can apply for either an Impact or Seed Funding Award.

The Schools First Awards have been developed by ACER, the Foundation for Young Australians and the National Australia Bank.

ACER conducted the original research that underpins the Schools First program, developed the criteria for the awards, trains the judges to ensure consistency in the assessment of schools' applications, assesses all applications, and provides customised feedback to each school that has submitted an application. These customised reports incorporate feedback from the assessors and are intended to help schools identify what they are doing well and what they might do to further develop their community partnerships.

In 2010, a total of 108 awards and \$5.2 million in funding has been made available for schools around Australia, compared to 88 awards and \$4.95 million last year. Of the 108 awards, 40 will be for outstanding Seed Funding applications and 68 will be for outstanding Impact Award applications.

ACER Senior Project Director Sharon Clerke says the best applications in 2009 showed clear and strong evidence of:

- having identified a student need (or opportunity) within the school
- collaborative decision-making and planning and shared expertise between the school and at least one community partner
- student-focused and educationally beneficial activities for students
- clear links between the identified need or opportunity, goals of the program of activities and tangible or anticipated outcomes.
- ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the partnership and program
- strong commitment from both school and partner to the partnership and program.

For further information and to apply visit www.schoolsfirst.edu.au

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The enduring appeal of learning styles

In an Australian Journal of Education article, ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Catherine Scott examines the continued popularity of 'learning styles' as an explanation for differences in student achievement and argues that there is a lack of evidence to support the well-entrenched use of learning styles to guide effective teaching practice.

According to Scott, while the term 'learning style' has commonsense appeal, there is no generally accepted definition of what these 'styles' may be. Furthermore, she argues, there is considerable confusion over the concept itself. A multitude of models exists, based on a variety of perceptual, cognitive and physiological factors, including preferring to work alone or in groups, in the evening or the morning, when the temperature is high or low, and so on. Similarly, within these models a variety of tests exist for the purpose of assessing the learning styles of learners although some tests appear to lack evidence of reliability or validity.

Scott argues in her article that an apparent lack of evidence in support of tailoring instruction to individual's learning styles has not prevented the term from being emphasised in discussions and recommendations about teaching practice. It also continues to influence what teachers do in their day-to-day work. Scott explains that the most popular models of learning styles evident in Australian schools derive from Fleming's (2009) theory, which divides learning into three groups: visual, auditory and tactile/kinaesthetic.

Scott points to Australian universities as a possible source of the ongoing popularity of the concept of learning styles. Her searches of the websites of Australian universities revealed numerous mentions of 'learning styles' that were overwhelmingly positive and promoting of the concept. For most universities, there were significantly more search hits for 'learning styles' than there were for 'effective teaching', which, Scott argues, has been shown to be a powerful positive influence on learning and an arguably highly effective component of teaching – feedback – may have been somewhat neglected.

Furthermore, Scott writes, an inspection of state education department websites reveals that 'learning styles' theory is actively promoted as an educational principle, backed by the existence of learning materials and professional development on the topic as well as the inclusion of the term in job descriptions.

Scott argues that learning styles theory may perpetuate the very stereotyping and harmful teaching practices it is said to combat and, in attempting to adapt classroom practice to learning styles, teachers can be distracted from models that Scott believes have proven benefits for children's learning, such as effective feedback.

The Enduring Appeal of Learning Styles, by Catherine Scott, appears in the Australian Journal of Education, Volume 54, Number 1, published in April this year. Further information about the AJE is available from <http://www.acer.edu.au/press/aje>

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ACER UPDATE

Staff in Australia's Schools - survey starts in August

Samples of schools will soon be invited to take part in the Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey.

Principals and teachers are encouraged to take part. It is critical that high quality, representative data are collected.

The survey, which is being conducted by ACER on behalf of DEEWR, will collect information that is vital for teacher workforce planning. It involves random samples of

Primary and Secondary schools:

- in the Government, Catholic and Independent sectors
- in all States and Territories

Teachers and school leaders will complete a short on-line survey. The data are confidential and no school or teacher will be identified.

The survey is widely supported. The Advisory Committee includes government and non-government school employers, principals' associations, teacher unions, teacher education institutions, and the ABS. For further information see: www.acer.edu.au/sias

Deputy CEO retires

ACER staff will come together on Friday 23 July to farewell Deputy CEO (Research) Dr John Ainley who officially retires after 35 years of service to ACER.

John first joined ACER as a Senior Research Officer in 1975 on secondment from Melbourne State College where he was a lecturer in Chemistry. In February 1978 John was appointed permanently to ACER as a Chief Research Officer. He held a number of senior research positions being appointed as Associate Director (Policy Research) in 1994 and becoming Deputy Director and head of research in 2000.

During his years at ACER John has overseen some of our largest and best-known international and national survey projects including the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and the IEA Civics and Citizenship Education Study.

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He has made an immense contribution to the advancement of education in Australia through advice to a range of government committees and worked closely with organisations including the Catholic Education Office and Graduate Careers Australia.

He is one of the longest serving members of ACER's current staff. Although John has now officially retired, he will return to ACER in a part-time capacity following a well-earned holiday.

Principal for a Day celebrates 10th anniversary

The Principal for a Day collaboration between Victorian government schools and their communities celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2010. Victoria's Principal for a Day event takes place this year on Tuesday 24 August.

The program is a joint partnership between the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and has been running in Victoria since 2001. 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.

Schools and community and business leaders interested in participating in the 2010 event can obtain more information from www.acer.edu.au/pfad or by contacting Ms Viv Acker on 9277 5617 or email [.\(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](mailto:.(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address))

ACER Principal Research fellow joins Queensland expert panel

Dr Gabrielle Matters, Principal Research Fellow and head of ACER's Brisbane office, has been appointed to an expert panel to help guide the future directions for state education in Queensland over the next decade. Queensland's Minister for Education and Training Geoff Wilson said in a [media statement](#) that the academic experts have been selected for their diverse areas of expertise. Mr Wilson said the panel would provide independent advice on how state education could build on current reforms and address the challenges of the future. The nine member panel held its first meeting on 15 July.

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Survey to quiz 300, 000 on engagement with learning

In August around 300,000 students and over 10,000 teaching staff will be invited to report on their engagement with learning and many of the broader, more enriching aspects of higher education by taking part in the 2010 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE).

The survey will involve students and staff from 54 higher education institutions – 32 Australian universities, seven New Zealand universities, and 15 other higher education providers.

The 2010 administration of AUSSE is the largest, most comprehensive and well validated survey yet conducted of whether students and institutions are engaging in effective educational practices. This is the fourth annual administration of the AUSSE, a study funded by participating institutions, which began in 2007.

Further information about AUSSE is available from <http://ausse.acer.edu.au>

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