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Lack of evidence hinders Indigenous strategies

Our ability to know what works to improve Indigenous students' attendance and retention levels is hindered by a lack of credible evidence, according to a new research paper.

School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian Students, the first Issues Paper produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, contends that evidence about attendance and retention strategies that work for Indigenous students is not strong.

ACER researchers Dr Nola Purdie and Sarah Buckley co-authored the paper, which draws upon key national and international studies to highlight the issues in analysing Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance and retention.

The paper shows that programs and strategies to improve Indigenous students' attendance and retention are varied, and educators are encouraged to use those strategies that have been shown to work. However, a review of material that claimed to evaluate which programs work found that very few high-quality evaluations have been conducted in this area.

Research revealed that many programs aimed at improved attendance and retention do not specify targets or key outcomes. Aims and objectives generally express a desire 'to improve levels...' and are too vague to be able to determine whether change has occurred.

The review therefore found no clear evidence about the success of the programs other than claims and opinion, unsupported by credible evidence.

One possible explanation for the lack of evidence on Indigenous student attendance and engagement is that such research requires a relatively large sample size and this is difficult to achieve in the Australian context.

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Another reason could be the poor reputation among many Indigenous people and communities of the term 'research', as much of it has been conducted from the perspective of an outsider rather than an insider and positions its people as 'objects' rather than participants in the process.

The paper recommends that future research must therefore adequately reflect the experiences and worldviews of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Constantly changing causes of non-attendance are identified as a further obstacle in examining what works to improve student attendance and retention.

The reasons for student absenteeism are complex and contextual but, generally, a combination of individual, family, community and school factors are involved.

While parents and pupils tend to stress school-related factors as the main cause, educators tend to believe that parental attitudes and the home environment are more influential.

The review did, however, find some consensus about Indigenous student attendance and retention. It is agreed that a significant gap exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance rates and that non-attendance and non-completion of school causes harm.

However, due to the different ways that student attendance and retention are recorded in the different states and territories, there is insufficient information to show if these gaps have increased or decreased over time.

The paper recommends that programs and strategies incorporate longitudinal monitoring and evaluation to track progress and confirm that programs are working.

Research conducted within this framework will not only benefit Indigenous students but all students across the nation.

The paper is available at:

http://www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/documents/issues_papers/ihw/33/index.cfm

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School influences on tertiary entrance scores

Policies designed to improve student performance should focus on individual students in need of assistance rather than the schools they attend, argues a research paper published in the international journal *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*.

Author and ACER Principal Research Fellow, Dr Gary Marks, says school-focused policies are unlikely to improve the performance of low-achieving students because most of the variation in student performance is within schools, rather than between schools.

Marks said policy makers traditionally tend to focus on improving student outcomes in low-socioeconomic status and disadvantaged schools, both of which are often viewed as synonymous with low-achieving schools. However, Marks' research shows that a school's socioeconomic status has little impact on student performance once student's individual characteristics are taken into account.

"This is largely due to the fact that low-achieving students are not just found in a small number of schools with particular characteristics, but are found in almost all schools" Dr Marks said.

In order to reach his conclusions, Marks analysed longitudinal data from the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study to identify school-level effects on the tertiary entrance performance of over 4000 Australian students. School-level effects examined include the socioeconomic context the school is located within, academic context, school resources, school climate and teacher efficacy.

The analysis found that students' tertiary entrance performance is influenced more by its academic context, rather than its socioeconomic level.

"Students' ENTER scores are boosted in schools with strong academic environments and weakened by schools with weak academic environments," Dr Marks said.

School materials and educational resources had no significant effects on tertiary entrance scores. However, teacher shortages in particular subject areas did result in slightly lower average ENTER scores for students.

Of the school climate measures, only 'Academic Press' – the extent to which schools pressure their students to perform at a higher level, through, for example, higher academic expectations, more homework and a more demanding syllabus – had a significant impact. The other measures of school climate (attitudes to school, student morale, student behaviour, and disciplinary climate) had small and not statistically significant effects on tertiary entrance performance.

"Schools improved their students' tertiary entrance performance above that expected by students' individual characteristics and other school effects when students were eager to learn, made good progress, worked hard and were well behaved," said Marks.

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School-level teacher efficacy, or the ability of teachers to teach effectively, had a positive although moderate effect on tertiary entrance results. This suggests that schools have higher levels of student performance when the teachers are viewed by students as knowing their subject well, being well prepared and organized, good communicators, and good at maintaining interest and enforcing discipline.

Marks' research also takes into account student-level influences of tertiary entrance performance. His paper examines the effects of demographic factors, student socioeconomic background, prior achievement and student attitudes, and investigates how much of the variation in student and school performance these factors account for.

The analysis found that students' prior academic achievement, as measured by PISA test score, has a much stronger impact on tertiary entrance performance than economic, social, and cultural status. There were no significant differences according to language background or family type; however students living in regional areas were slightly disadvantaged in the competition for tertiary entrance places. Girls experienced slightly larger performance gains than boys during the final years of secondary school.

Unsurprisingly, more positive attitudes to school were associated with higher ENTER scores, as was a strong disciplinary climate.

"These analyses indicate that school factors do not have a decisive role in influencing student performance," said Marks.

Marks said that, instead, low achieving students would benefit from being placed in a more academic environment, while all schools would benefit from better teachers.

The full article, 'What aspects of schooling are important? School effects on tertiary entrance performance', was published by the international journal *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* in April 2010 and is available to download from http://works.bepress.com/gary_marks/70/

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Teacher certification requires balance

Finding the right balance between encouraging participation and recognising the best will be a key challenge to implementing an Australian teacher certification system, according to an international expert in teacher assessment.

Dr Drew Gitomer, Director of the Understanding Teaching Quality Centre at the Educational Testing Service in the USA, this week presented a series of workshops for staff at the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) on recent developments in teacher assessment.

Speaking on day four of the five day workshop program, Dr Gitomer said there is a tension between encouraging participation at the 'highly accomplished' certification level and selecting appropriately high standards so that you are recognising the very best.

"One of the concerns (in the USA) that were raised by our research was whether the standards were indeed high enough," said Gitomer. "Was the bar set high enough to differentiate highly accomplished teachers from accomplished teachers?"

"The question is; if you try to move the bar to differentiate people more clearly, will you still have the participation?"

ACER drew upon Dr Gitomer's wealth of experience in developing and implementing assessment systems for teachers in the USA to further enhance ACER's capacity to develop and operate standards-based systems for the assessment of teacher professional knowledge and performance.

Teacher certification is a current focus area for educational policy-makers.

Based on the findings of the 2009 report by ACER Chief Executive Officer Professor Geoff Masters, *A Shared Challenge: Improving Literacy, Numeracy and Science Learning in Queensland Primary Schools*, the Queensland government is introducing a pre-registration test for aspiring primary teachers.

Under the Queensland Education Performance Review, from 2011 all teaching graduates will need to pass the beginning teacher certification assessment before they can register with the Queensland College of Teachers and take up a classroom position.

During this year's election campaign, the federal Labor Government announced that bonuses will be paid to highly accomplished teachers in 2014, based on their performance in 2013.

To do this the teacher certification systems that identify highly accomplished teachers need to be developed, tested and ready for implementation within the next two to three years.

Dr Gitomer believes that successful implementation of a teacher certification system requires partnerships, commitment, and a staggered roll-out.

"If it was easy, it would have been done already."

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Visualising VET Leadership

The Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector faces a leadership succession crisis and must implement strategies to attract, identify and develop a new generation of leaders, according to a new report.

VET Leadership for the Future details the findings of a collaborative research study, conducted by ACER and the LH Martin Institute, to examine VET leadership.

Report co-author, ACER Research Director Hamish Coates, said organisations and governments must make VET leadership an attractive proposition to a new generation of leaders as the current, older generation of leaders leaves the system.

“By attracting, engaging and retaining new people from both inside and outside the VET sector, we have the capacity to map out new conceptualisations of the leadership profession,” Coates said.

A national survey of 327 practising VET leaders revealed telling insights into current perceptions of the profession. In addition to completing the survey, respondents were asked to provide an analogy that best describes what it is like to be in their current role.

Responses from CEOs included “being a magician” and “running a very small country”. One senior executive said their role was like “Being a sheepdog – you have a whole flock of very keen people ready to run off in all directions and you need to keep them focused and heading in the right direction.”

Senior managers spoke of “constantly moving goal posts” and “being given responsibility for a luxury car and not being allowed to drive it”. Senior practitioners described their role as “skating on thin ice” and “a never ending journey, with great views of ever changing scenery, a relatively clear intended destination, but no map”.

Generally, senior executives reported a capacity to steer their organisation forwards within manageable parameters, whereas leaders with more operational roles reported stress in trying to manage amid uncertain challenges and without the support or space required to deliver necessary outcomes.

Professor Coates said these analogies support research findings that VET leadership involves complex navigation of uncertainty, initiating and dealing with change, working with cumbersome organisational cultures and processes, and dealing with the unexpected.

“The analogies put particular focus on the pressures and freedoms that shape leaders’ work,” Coates said. “This reflects the complex and ever changing policy, funding and regulatory environment within which VET leaders operate.”

Leaders in all roles said that managing organisational change is the most important aspect of their work. With the exception of those who identified as being directly involved in teaching, all other leaders flagged teaching and learning as the least important facet of their work.

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The study found that in many respects the concerns of leaders are only loosely aligned with the broader pressures confronting the VET sector. In increasingly commercial contexts, VET leaders focus on planning and implementing change rather than graduate outcomes, quality and education standards.

"VET leaders are focused on input-side factors such as student numbers and funding," Coates said. "A challenge for the future involves developing a more outcomes-focused orientation, one centred on effective change implementation, on delivery, and on high-quality graduate outcomes."

The research findings underline the need to define the profession of the VET leader.

A review of prior research suggests a leadership framework should be comprised of personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities or qualities as well as role-specific and generic competencies, skills and knowledge.

Evidence from the 327 leaders who participated in the study supported this conceptualisation of leadership but indicated a disparity between the capabilities identified as important for effective leadership and the way leaders are identified and promoted.

"Arguably the most important implication of this study is the need to implement tested strategies for identifying and developing aspiring leaders," Coates said.

Results from the survey indicate that only a moderate amount of professional development has been devoted to enhancing the capabilities that respondents identify as being the most important for effective leadership. Most leaders expressed a preference for practice-based, self-managed learning, rather than formal development activities.

The report suggests that new leadership programs, built on authentic and active modes of learning, should focus on working in complex environments and on change management skills.

"There is scope for the findings from this study to play a major role in reshaping the approaches which are used for leadership selection and development," said Coates.

"The VET sector needs research-based strategies for managing the looming leadership succession crisis."

Professor Coates co-authored the report with Justin Brown and Tim Friedman from ACER, Professor Lynn Meek from the LH Martin Institute, and VET consultants Peter Noonan and John Mitchell.

The full research report, *VET Leadership for the Future: Contexts, characteristics and capabilities*, is available from http://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/13/

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ACER Update

Staff in Australia's Schools Survey – Final Chance to Participate

The Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey closes shortly.

Schools and teachers are encouraged to take part if invited. This is an opportunity to provide staffing information and views direct to policymakers.

ACER is conducting this major national survey on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). It covers:

- professional learning activities
- workload
- career pathways
- job satisfaction
- career intentions
- preparation for leadership roles
- staff shortages

All invited schools and teachers should take part so their views are heard and high quality data collected.

The survey is designed to be easy and quick to complete online. The data are confidential and no school or teacher will be identified.

The project Advisory Committee includes government and non-government school employers, principals associations, teacher education institutions, teacher unions, and the ABS. The survey is supported by the Australian College of Educators.

For further information see: www.acer.edu.au/sias

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CEET annual conference

The annual conference of the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) will take place at Ascot House, Ascot Vale, Melbourne on Friday 29 October. The theme of this year's conference is Education and training for a more productive Australia. The conference program includes:

- Issues for the VET sector in the context of the National Workforce Development Strategy, Robin Shreeve, Skills Australia
- A changing labour market and the future of VET, Tom Karmel, NCVET
- VET in the next decade: options and opportunities, Virginia Simmons, Consultant and former TAFE CEO
- Market facilitation strategy, John Spasevski, DIIRD
- Investment in VET for a productive and inclusive society, Peter Noonan, The Allen Consulting Group
- Literacy, numeracy, employment and productivity, Gerald Burke, Monash University & Skills Australia
- Are school-leavers turning away from VET? Evidence from *On Track*, Phil McKenzie & Sheldon Rothman, ACER
- Low emission economy: employment and skills effects, Chandra Shah & Sue North, CEET
- Industry-level measures of productivity growth, Mike Long, CEET
- The effects of changed migration policy on assimilation of Australian skilled migrants, Weiping Kostenko, CEET
- Achieving productivity gains in education, Ben Jensen, Grattan Institute

Registration details are available from the CEET website at <http://www.education.monash.edu.au/centres/ceet/conferences/2010.html>

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