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RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS

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No. 18 Summer 2007

Aptitude testing for university selection

Supporting transitions
from school

Restoring our edge
in education

Engaging learners in higher
and vocational education

ACER Leadership
Centre launched

Australian Council for Educational Research

ACER

Education in the Spotlight



Professor Geoff Masters
Chief Executive Officer

Education issues moved to centre stage in 2007 as both major political parties made education a priority in the lead up to the federal election. A wide range of issues were hotly debated during the campaign, including school funding issues, early childhood, national curriculum, the national skills shortage, performance pay for teachers, higher education funding and the delivery of technical education and training. Many organisations joined the education debate, including the Business Council of Australia with its call for a radical overhaul of pay structures for teachers.

The priority given to education during the year recognises the crucial role that education and training will play in increasing the life chances of individual Australians, creating a fairer and more just society, and raising levels of national productivity. Australian politicians and business leaders are not alone in their appreciation of the essential role that school completion rates and achievement levels will have on future levels of national wellbeing and productivity; this has been a familiar theme in the political processes of a growing number of countries.

Much of what is now required to improve the quality of Australian school education is widely understood and agreed. The challenge is not so much in identifying what needs to be done, as in finding ways to overcome obstacles that often have their origins in longstanding structural arrangements, traditional practices and vested interests. Significant improvements in school, higher and vocational education will require bold new approaches which, in some cases, will involve changes in how we think about and provide education for young people.

This issue of Research Developments makes a contribution to future planning in Australian education. In their article, Jennifer Bryce and Michelle Anderson explore ways of supporting young people to make transitions from school to work or further education. Marita MacMahon Ball considers how aptitude testing could increase access to university for some young people who may not be selected by more traditional methods such as Tertiary Entrance Ranks, and Hamish Coates explains why student engagement is a key to retaining students in education and training and enhancing their educational experiences.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Geoff Masters". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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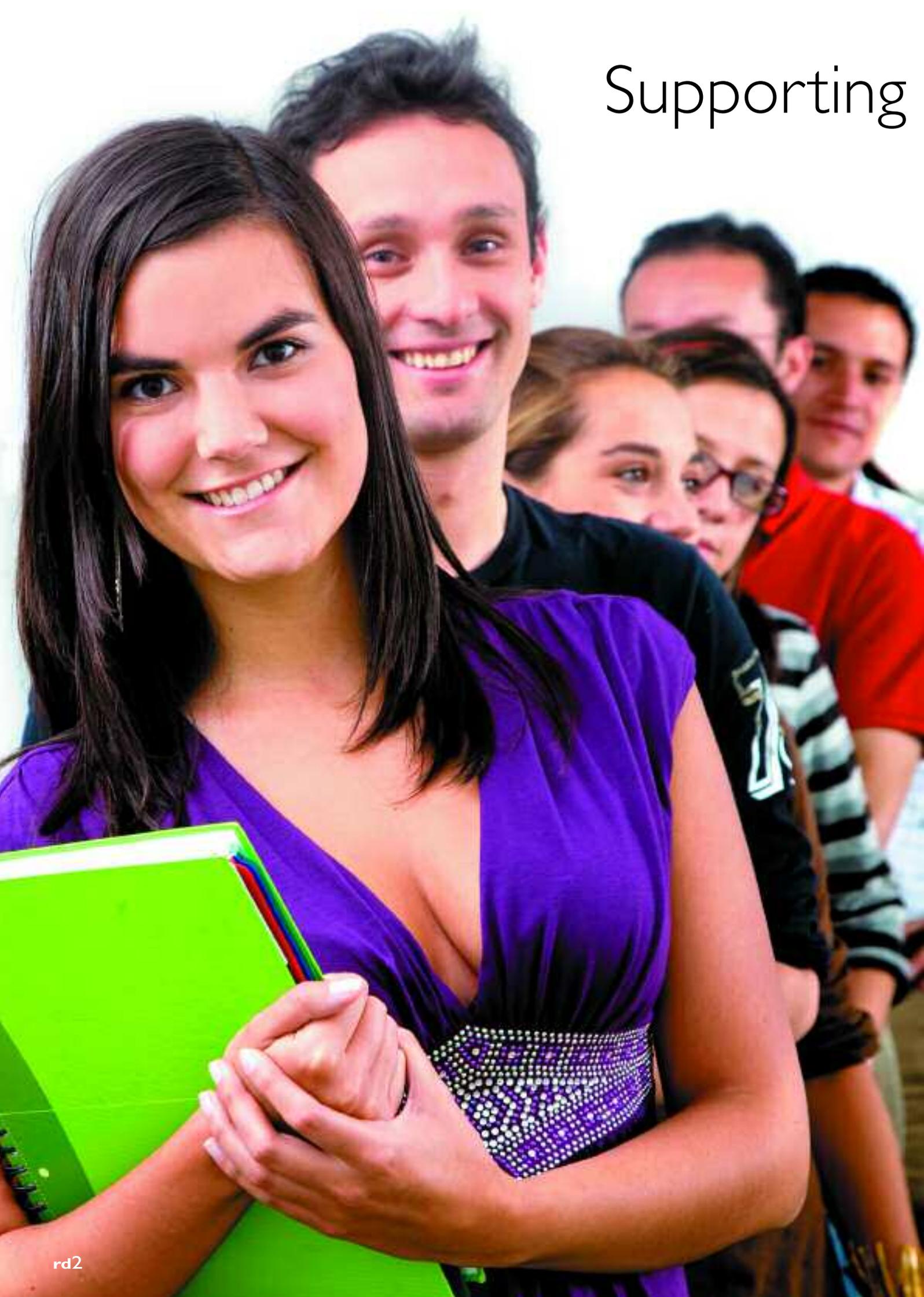
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Supporting



transitions from school



**Jennifer Bryce and
Michelle Anderson**

Jennifer is a Senior Research Fellow with ACER's Assessment and Reporting research program. Michelle is a Senior Research Fellow with ACER's Teaching and Leadership research program.

*New research reveals ways of supporting students' transitions from school, as **Jennifer Bryce** and **Michelle Anderson** explain.*

A new report, *Australian stories: Young people, their families and post-school plans*, building on research undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the Smith Family, examines the stories of a group of young people who have participated in the Smith Family Learning for Life scholarship program and who have made a positive start towards achieving their post-school goals. The research involved a series of in-depth interviews with nine young people (two males and seven females) and with nine family members (seven mothers, one father and one older sibling). By asking these young people questions about their decision-making, the barriers they faced and their strategies for overcoming these, the study suggests ways that young people in similar situations may be helped in making successful transitions from school.

There are complex choices and pathways potentially open to young people as they make their way from school to work or further education. In contemporary Australia the transition from school to post-school activities is not a simple, linear, 'one-off' process, and there are concerns about whether all young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have the capacity, skills, knowledge and support to successfully navigate their way, and to avoid being in 'at risk' circumstances.

The choices and pathways available to young people today as they make their way from school to work or further education are many and varied. What was once seen to be a linear pathway is now often described as a mosaic, or 'crazy paving and stepping stones,' where students move in and out of education and different areas or types of employment (sometimes combining the two) and are more likely than previous generations to experience periods of part-time employment, casual work, unemployment and, for some young people, time outside the labour force and education altogether.

A significant proportion of disadvantaged young people fail to make a successful transition to work or further study. This has an adverse effect on individual lives, as well as on wider social and economic development. Supporting young people to make successful school to work transitions is important not just in economic terms but also for the human consequences associated with unsuccessful transitions.

Significant influences on young people's post-school planning, particularly when they weigh up the costs and benefits of pursuing university careers, include the young people's own perceptions of their abilities and interests. Family expectations are significant and often young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds give little



consideration to further education because it is not a part of their family's experience, but when such young people do pursue further education, assistance from a mentor is invaluable for both motivational influence and practical needs.

Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have a more instrumental view of education and may be more likely than their more comfortably off peers to have shorter-term goals in relation to pursuing further education. Financial assistance may play a less significant role than might be expected, and geographical distance and isolation appear to discourage university enrolment.

In examining the factors that appear to help young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds to make successful transitions from school to post-school options, the study found that while there was much mention of the assistance of financial support, such as scholarships from the Smith Family, financial support alone was not sufficient to help these young people to achieve their goals. Mentoring was very important, along with the support of significant teachers and friends, who complemented the support provided by families. In some cases such mentors could provide practical support that families were unable to access.

There were several main barriers encountered by young people undertaking transition

from school to post-school options. There is little evidence of families in this study being able to work closely with schools to provide guidance for their children, and many families in this study had no familiarity with university environments. The array of tertiary courses was confusing and sometimes lacked meaning, and most of these young people had non-linear pathways – a kind of trial and error process – before discovering the courses they were pursuing at the time of interview for the research.

Further, young people sometimes suffered from what seemed to be a self-imposed pressure when they were in Year 12. Most families did not overtly pressure children to do well, but several young people interviewed had achieved well at secondary school, then 'ran amok' when faced with Year 12 exams.

While formal support networks such as schools and career guidance programs provide information to young people in their senior years at school, the informal support network that families provide is equally if not more important. This influence is apparent from the early years of secondary school.

Although parents are often motivated and well intentioned, they are not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children. Some parents report that they lack the tools and resources necessary to help students through the post-school planning process.

The majority of formal career guidance programs appear to focus on the provision of information to senior secondary students in isolation from their families and home experiences, but research suggests that young people need support with post-school planning from the early years of secondary schooling, if not before, and

Be informed!

that support must take into account the range of influences on students' career decision-making.

Policy and programs need to consider children and youth within the context of their families and communities in order to improve their post-school options. There is much research about the pathways that young people take but less understanding surrounds the processes by which they make these choices – yet, understanding these processes is fundamental to program and policy development that will enable all young people to make informed decisions about their futures.

This article draws on *Australian stories: Young people, their families and post-school plans*, a research report by Jennifer Bryce, Michelle Anderson, Tracey Frigo and Phillip McKenzie, and the research literature review by Tracey Frigo. The research was conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the Smith Family. All the young people's stories can be found in full within the research report. The research report and the literature review are available from the Smith Family website at

www.thesmithfamily.com.au

This article first appeared in *Teacher*, August 2007. ■



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Restoring our edge



in education



Professor Geoff Masters

Geoff is ACER's CEO and author of the recent report commissioned by the Business Council of Australia, Restoring our edge in education: Making Australia's education system its next competitive advantage.

*Much of what is required to improve the quality of Australian school education is widely understood and agreed, as **Professor Geoff Masters** explains.*

The levels of educational attainment of Australian students will play a key role in the outcome of future individual, social and economic prosperity. Individuals benefit from high levels of education and training, which increase individuals' ability to secure meaningful work, earn more, and break cycles of disadvantage. Society as a whole benefits from high levels of education and training, which are related to better health, family functioning and children's wellbeing, less violent crime, and even a cleaner environment. The economic prosperity of the nation is also secured through high levels of education and training, which are directly linked to high levels of workforce participation and national productivity. While the educational standards of Australian students are excellent in many areas, policies that support further improvement of education and training levels will have significant positive effects for individuals, standards of living and social cohesion.

Australia's education: Achievements and concerns

There have been steady increases in the educational achievement levels of young Australians over recent years, but several issues of concern remain: the considerable number of young people who become disengaged from schooling, do not achieve high educational standards and have restricted participation in employment in work or further study; and the effect this

will have on the future workforce, namely a shortage of the well-educated and highly-skilled young people Australia needs.

Despite overall increases in education levels and high levels of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy among young Australians on average, there are wide gaps between the highest and lowest levels of achievement, and a significant proportion of young people leave school with only minimal standards of education. Many seem to become disenchanted with, and disengaged from, schooling during their secondary years, or leave early, giving Australia one of the lowest secondary school completion rates among developed countries.

Children begin school with markedly different levels of individual development and school readiness, but the education system does not seem to provide redress to the wide variations in students' levels of achievement. In some areas of the school curriculum, variability in students' levels of attainment appears to increase across the years of school.

Low levels of literacy and numeracy are associated with early school leaving and are correlated with a range of other variables, including low overall academic achievement, disengagement, truancy and anti-social behaviour. Students who do not achieve at a high level or do not complete secondary school are more likely to experience unemployment, are less likely



to engage in further education or training after leaving school, and tend to earn less when they do gain employment.

Too few young people are developing the knowledge and skills required for effective workforce participation. Australia faces a particular skills shortage at the trade and associate professional levels. The future Australian workforce will require both higher level skills and a broader range of skills which will need to be updated more frequently than in the past.

Australia's future economic competitiveness clearly will depend on maintaining and enhancing current levels of education and training, and in particular, on increasing the numbers of young people completing secondary school or the equivalent.

Strategies to improve education and training outcomes

There is no simple solution to address the dual concerns of the significant proportion of students disengaging from schooling and achieving only minimal standards, and the considerable skills shortage in a range of industries and skill levels. There are several strategies, however, that Australia can implement at the level of school education that are likely to deliver improvements in education and training outcomes.

The strategies are early intervention, customisation, professionalism of teaching, increased investment, and improved governance.

Early intervention

The early intervention strategy requires the education system to provide educationally-oriented early learning, and to identify students' potential learning problems before they become entrenched and before students become disenchanted and disengaged.

The importance of the early years to children's lives is now beyond question but policy and practice in early education and care in Australia still lack focus and integration, and to date, Australia has not had a coordinated, national, whole-of-government approach to early childhood education and care.

The complexity of existing planning, regulations and funding of current early childhood arrangements is contributing to subsequent differences in educational outcomes. In particular, the developing trend for welfare-oriented childcare for low income families, as contrasted with educationally-oriented preschools and kindergartens for middle income and more affluent families, will further polarise academic outcomes already differentiated along socioeconomic and geographic lines.

This strategy requires a greater focus on development in early childhood; a coordinated, national, whole-of-government approach to early childhood education and care; and routine assessments to identify and address learning difficulties in early childhood.

Customisation

The customisation strategy requires the education system to make education and training more responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of individual learners.

In schools, it has been common to group students by age for the delivery of grade-based curricula, but in a mixed-ability classroom, the same learning activities can be frustratingly difficult for some students and boringly easy for others. One-size-fits-all approaches are in general much less effective than approaches which are responsive to the progress and needs of individual learners.

Group-based solutions also have been sought to problems of student underperformance. Although differences in school achievement can be seen at the level of groups, such as boys, Indigenous students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, group-based interventions have in general been disappointing. Interventions targeted on underperforming individuals, regardless of group, are likely to be more effective. Regular monitoring is required to establish current levels of attainment and to diagnose obstacles to further progress.

In vocational education and training, young people traditionally have prepared for a relatively narrow range of occupations through standard courses and apprenticeships. In most cases, the assumption has been that people will remain in those jobs for extended periods, if not for life. In reality, however, today's young people will be employed in a wide variety of occupations, are likely to change jobs frequently and to be engaged in ongoing employment-related learning in relation to those jobs.

Future school and vocational education curricula should begin with an analysis of the kinds of learning likely to be required for the future, make clear what students are expected to learn, promote higher order skills and deep understandings of subject matter, and provide flexibility to enable teachers to respond to individual needs and local contexts. Flexible modes of delivery, including online learning, will offer further opportunities to customise education and training.

Professionalisation of teaching

Over recent decades, too few highly able young people have been pursuing teaching as a career. The challenge is both to attract more highly able young people into teaching

and to keep them in classrooms for longer periods of time.

Particular challenges exist in some curriculum areas such as mathematics and science. There are shortages of well-qualified mathematics and science teachers, especially in some schools and parts of the country, and large numbers of teachers are teaching in areas for which they are not well prepared.

Current pay structures see most teachers hit a pay ceiling about a decade after entering the profession. The best teachers tend to be promoted into leadership roles within schools, reducing the amount of time spent in classrooms. Rather than encouraging their development as excellent classroom teachers, current pay structures tend to encourage good teachers to stop teaching.

Part of the solution to this problem is likely to be the introduction of better ways of rewarding high-quality classroom teaching. Schools need explicit standards for highly accomplished practice, credible methods of assessing whether teachers meet these standards, and accompanying financial recognition to retain excellent teachers in classrooms.

Further, teachers require the forms of support normally available to professionals, such as access to paraprofessional assistance, current research and knowledge, and high-quality materials and resources.

At the same time, school leaders must be given greater say in staffing decisions, including appointments, processes for removing underperforming staff, and mechanisms for rewarding high performers.

Increased investment

Australia's public investment in education is below the OECD mean and Australia relies more heavily than most other countries on

private educational expenditure. Australia has a very low level of investment in early childhood education; physical facilities in many government schools are inadequate; vocational education funding fell by 11 per cent in the decade to 2004; and universities rely on private sources for more than half of their funding.

Increased public investment in education at all levels — early childhood, school education, vocational education and training and higher education — is required.

In the school education sector, partnerships between schools (both government and non-government) and between schools and local businesses and community organisations may also provide alternative sources of funding and greater sharing and more efficient use of human resources and physical facilities. Schooling outcomes also are likely to be improved by providing opportunities for learning to occur in a wider range of contexts than traditional classroom settings, and in more flexible timeframes than the traditional classroom day.

Improved governance

Australia is one of just a few countries with a federated system of states and territories with constitutional responsibility for school education. The consequences of Australia's inherited arrangements include inconsistencies in matters such as school starting ages, senior certificates and school curricula; the duplication of effort across state and territory agencies; a lack of comparability of achievement levels across Australia; and financial challenges for smaller jurisdictions in developing quality curricula and examination systems. A challenge over coming years will be to develop greater consistency around key school education issues, accompanied by increased investment in all Australian schools.

Educational policies must clarify the roles and responsibilities of different tiers of government and improve mechanisms for ensuring that education and training are meeting the needs of individuals and Australian society. There is an urgent need to reduce the current levels of duplication and to remove the unnecessary differences in educational provision across states and territories. At the same time, schools should be afforded greater local autonomy, flexibility and responsiveness to student, community and industry needs.

Meeting the challenge

Much of what is now required to improve the quality of Australian school education is widely understood and agreed. The challenge is not so much in identifying what needs to be done, as in finding ways to overcome obstacles that often have their origins in longstanding structural arrangements, traditional practices and vested interests. Significant improvements in school education will require bold new approaches, which, in some cases, will change how we think about and provide schooling for young people.

This is an edited version of a paper published by the Business Council of Australia, entitled *Restoring our edge in education: Making Australia's education system its next competitive advantage*. The full report is available at www.bca.com.au ■

Aptitude testing



for university selection



Marita MacMahon Ball

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(Higher Education),
ACER Assessment Services.*

Marita MacMahon Ball

*explains how aptitude testing
can provide universities with
more sophisticated tools for
selecting students for admission
to higher education degrees.*

Historically, entrance to university in Australia over the last 50 years has been determined by: achievement in curriculum-based examinations, the subsequent award of a state certificate and the calculation of a tertiary entrance score. Initially the results of public exams held at the completion of the final year of high school provided the only information used to determine end of school achievement; since the 1980s work completed during the senior years of school was included and variously weighted. Subsequently in some states and territories, the public exams disappeared and a system of aptitude testing was introduced as a means of informing the value of the school-assessed tasks. Aptitude testing also became, for entrance to certain courses, a discrete measure that alongside academic achievement and possible other attributes, helped decision-makers process applications.

Consideration of the use of aptitude testing for admission to university courses is now being contemplated on a much wider scale. This follows the Australian government's announcement in the 2007 budget of the intention to pilot a Year 12 aptitude test to assist university entrance. In October the Department of Education Science and Training awarded the contract to conduct the first phase of this pilot program to ACER.

The development of aptitude tests for university admission is not new to ACER. The Special Tertiary Admissions Test, the

Australian Law Schools Entrance Test, the Undergraduate Medical and Health Sciences Test (UMAT), the Graduate Australian Medical School Admission Test (GAMSAT), the International Student Admission Test, and the Australian Technology Network Engineering Selection Test (ATNEST) are all in use today in Australia. ACER is also active in the United Kingdom and Ireland where it delivers tests for admission to medical and health professional courses and is involved in a pilot study with Cambridge Assessment to develop an aptitude test for undergraduate admission.

The constructs of each of the above tests were determined for the selection of specific student cohorts. The Special Tertiary Admissions Test aims to identify mature age candidates who may not have completed high school or did not do so recently and who have the capacity for university study. The Australian Law Schools Entrance Test refines this process further for mature age candidates who wish to study Law. The test focus is on skills deemed to be important for the study of Law, such as the ability to infer, and extrapolate from ideas; sift, analyse and critique information; comprehend and interpret ideas, arguments and information; and evaluate and judge issues and arguments.

UMAT, used to identify prospective doctors, dentists and others in the Health Science fields, allows universities to not only consider academic results of aspiring students, but

to also assess attributes considered important for student success in the health sector; attributes such as clinical judgement and the ability to engage in effective relationships with others. GAMSAT aims to achieve a similar outcome but from candidates who have already completed a first degree. To this end it includes a section assessing assumed scientific knowledge.

The audience for the International Student Admissions Test is culturally diverse students. This test has a two-fold purpose: it informs universities about the international candidate's potential for higher education study; and gives meaning and allows for verification of candidates' international academic transcripts.

The Australian Technology Network Engineering Selection Test was first administered in 2007. The Australian Technology Network group of universities has recognised that some candidates with the interest in and capacity to study Engineering have been excluded from Engineering courses because they have not pursued certain academic pathways. The Engineering Selection Test, with its emphasis on problem solving and scientific critical thinking allows for the identification of such candidates and their subsequent admission to bridging programs that will enable them to then study Engineering. The test, in recognition of the importance of project management skills as an attribute of the 21st-century engineer; also measures interpersonal reasoning.

Characteristically all the above tests have addressed certain criteria to guide their development. These criteria include who is being selected and what skills are being tested. Unlike traditional IQ tests, which include questions on vocabulary, patterns and abstract content, all the above aptitude tests measure candidates' abilities

to understand information provided and to apply that information to realistic problems. The focus, with different emphases, is on academic reasoning; the kinds of thinking that underpin higher education studies and are essential across a range of academic disciplines.

It is also significant that the universities who use these aptitude tests have the discretion to use them as they choose. A given test component, for example, may receive a double weighting by one institution while another may use it for purposes of screening only, to 'select out' rather than 'select in'.

The defining characteristics of all the above tests is that, with the exception of a few faculties in a few universities who admit students with a Special Tertiary Admissions Test score alone, the aptitude test score is considered for admission purposes alongside academic credentials. This is also the overriding intention of the implementation of aptitude testing on a wider scale for university admission, as proposed with the 2007 pilot.

The test that will be administered for the 2007-2008 pilot is *uniTEST*. It was developed by ACER and Cambridge Assessment to assist Australian and UK universities identify students with the verbal, quantitative and critical reasoning skills required for university study. The test is designed to make university more accessible to students whose backgrounds and circumstances may have placed them at a disadvantage in regular selection processes.

Further to this, *uniTEST* can assist universities to be more discriminate with the selection of candidates clustered around the course 'cut-off' mark, with the use of a process that is both transparent and accountable.

Finally, a common Year 12 aptitude test may provide more direct comparisons of interstate applicants and assist in the statistical process used to compare tertiary entrance ranks across Australia.

A key component of the *uniTEST* pilot will be the research following the trial. The evaluation of *uniTEST* will measure whether there is a correlation between the aptitude test scores and academic progress. A range of criterion measures will be used to inform judgement and evaluate the predictive validity of *uniTEST*.

There is every indication that across the sector there is disquiet over the use of tertiary entrance ranks as the sole determinant for university entrance. While there are already some measures in place to address issues of equity and access with the broadening of selection processes, the strongest endorsement to widen participation and refine the university admission process is for the introduction of national aptitude testing to complement student academic scores.

The 2007 pilot and the use of *uniTEST* represents a welcome addition to the student selection landscape.

Further information

Further information about *uniTEST* and participation in the *uniTEST* pilot is available online from <http://unitest.acer.edu.au> ■



Student Aptitude Test for Tertiary Admission (SATTA)

ACER has been contracted to conduct stage one of the Federal Government's pilot Student Aptitude Test for Tertiary Admission (SATTA). ACER will use uniTEST during the trial.

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) will subsidise universities' participation in the trial by providing funding for universities to test up to 20 000 students, as well as providing up to \$10 000 to each participating Australian university to promote the scheme.

The pilot of *uniTEST* will provide universities with additional information on prospective students and provide alternative pathways to university for some students who may otherwise have not gained a university place.

uniTEST assesses candidates' generic reasoning and thinking skills, which are considered necessary for successful university study. The candidates' results may then be considered alongside their academic achievement scores to help determine their suitability for university study.

To date the Australian National University and Monash University have used the test, with Macquarie University holding a test session on 8 December to support their 2008 student intake. Enquiries have been received from a number of other institutions which are looking to apply the program.

For information about participating in a pilot program or attending *uniTEST* information sessions please contact Ms Tanya Williams, Project Director, ACER on (03) 9277 5736 or williams@acer.edu.au

For further information about stage two of this pilot program, please contact Ms Jo Groube, Director, School and Student Reporting Section, DEST, on (02) 6240 7811 or joanne.groube@dest.gov.au

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Engaging



learners in higher and vocational education



Dr Hamish Coates

Hamish is a Senior Research Fellow at ACER and leads ACER's research on higher education

*Understanding student engagement is the key to enhancing higher and vocational education. **Hamish Coates** explains how ACER research is helping providers improve learning processes and student outcomes.*

Understanding and effectively managing students' engagement in education plays a significant role in enhancing learning processes and outcomes. ACER projects are underway to develop resources and insights for understanding and enhancing student engagement in higher and vocational education.

Contemporary perspectives on student engagement define it as students' involvement with activities and conditions that are linked with high quality learning. Current work builds on decades of empirical research, much of it longitudinal, that have identified the characteristics of effective learning.

Fundamentally, engagement is based on the assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Interest is focused on the extent to which students participate in active learning, interactions with staff, enriching activities and collaborative work.

While students are responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning also depends on institutions and staff generating conditions which stimulate and encourage involvement. Thus student engagement surveys also measure perceptions of learning support, academic challenge, and teaching quality.

Engaging learners in higher education

ACER is working with Australian and New Zealand universities to conduct the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). The AUSSE is being run for the first time in 2007 in collaboration with 25 Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions.

The aim of the AUSSE is to stimulate evidence-based conversations about student engagement in university education. By providing information which is generalisable and sensitive to institutional diversity, and with international points of reference, the AUSSE will play a very important role in helping institutions monitor and enhance the quality of education.

The AUSSE was developed to bring together existing work in the area, and leverage benefits from a collaborative, multi-institutional approach. It's critical that surveys involve valid instruments and processes so that they provide the kind of high-quality data which can be used to improve practice. It's also critical to have meaningful points of reference to get most value from reports, along with well-tested strategies for embedding results into practice.

The AUSSE has introduced new psychometric approaches and advanced survey methodologies into Australasian higher education. It involves administration of a state-of-the-art Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) to a representative sample of first-year and later-year students at each institution. The survey is managed by ACER, with input by participating institutions. A robust and efficient survey process has been developed with inbuilt quality controls.

The SEQ provides measurement of six scales. These include students' participation in active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences and work integrated learning. It measures students' perceptions of academic challenge, and the supportiveness of their learning environment.

The AUSSE has formative links with the United States National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a collection developed in the mid 1990s and run annually at around 750 US and Canadian higher education institutions. AUSSE results can be benchmarked with NSSE results, providing valuable points of reference for internationally focused higher education institutions.

The first AUSSE results will be reported to participating institutions in November 2007, providing foundations for a suite of development and enhancement activities. A suite of resources and workshops will be developed to support the use of the data in quality enhancement and improvement activities. As part of this, ACER will work with universities to enhance the AUSSE resources and methods.

Engaging learners in vocational education and training

In a separate but conceptually related development, ACER is working on behalf of the National Quality Council (NQC) to produce a suite of survey resources to help Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) across Australia capture, analyse and use information on the quality of vocational education and training.

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007 provides for information to be gathered against specified quality indicators. AQTF 2007 is the national set of standards which assures nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia's vocational education and training system.

To support RTOs, a Learner Questionnaire (LQ) is being developed to monitor learner engagement. As with the AUSSE SEQ, the LQ is designed for administration to currently enrolled learners in less than 15 minutes in online or paper form. The same LQ form is used for learners enrolled in all forms of training, including apprenticeships and traineeships.

The LQ is designed to measure several facets of education and training. Key aspects include: learners' engagement; the quality of training; learners' work readiness and competency development; perceptions of relevance and quality of resources and assessment; and the general supports provided to learners.

A Survey Management and Reporting Tool (SMART) has been developed to assist RTOs enter, analyse and report their survey

results in ways that are likely to be of most use in quality management activities.

It is envisaged that this information will provide a valuable source of data for RTOs to gauge how well they are meeting client needs, develop relationships with stakeholders, and manage internal quality improvement activities. The information may also contribute to a registering body's risk assessment of an RTO's quality, and inform decisions concerning the frequency and targeting of audits.

New perspectives on higher and vocational education

Understanding and effectively managing learners' engagement in education plays a significant role in enhancing educational processes and outcomes. Information on student engagement provides coincident ('real-time') insights on learning processes. These insights can help institutions identify how to attract and, importantly, retain students, and manage resources, and monitor programs and services. They offer the most reliable proxy measures of learning outcomes and provide excellent diagnostic measures for enhancement activities. Comparison over time or across groups provides a means identifying the 'value added' by an educational experience.

Together, the AUSSE and AQTF developments seek to stimulate new conversations about attracting, engaging and retaining students in higher and vocational education. They provide a basis for learner-focused quality enhancement activities, the development of enhancement resources, and a range of evidence-based collaborations. ■

ACER Leadership Centre launched

ACER launched the Leadership Centre in July 2007. The Leadership Centre replaces the former Australian Principals Centre and broadens the leadership focus to include all educational leaders. The new ACER Leadership Centre will focus on providing practical support to the professional learning and professional work of current and aspiring educational leaders throughout Australia.



Dr Neil Carrington

An innovative theatrical technique refined by the ACER Leadership Centre and Queensland University of Technology is proving that success can be foretold. The 'prophetical' technique was a highlight of recent workshops on 'Developing Performance Cultures in Schools', which aimed to help the top 60 executives of Education Queensland to uncover and explore issues related to the implementation and conduct of the department's performance development framework.

The prophetical is a form of applied theatre in which participants create a prophecy, which foretells of possible future events, and which is also a hypothetical proposition. The prophetical explores a given occurrence through dramatic scenarios, which are rational suppositions about the future. Participants explore versions of the future, especially flawed futures that can be corrected or transformed through their interventions and actions. The scenarios are based on a rigorous research process to ensure each is relevant and realistic.

Following the presentation of the prophetical workshops, Director of the Leadership Centre, Dr Neil Carrington has been engaged to participate in Education Queensland's travelling scholar program and assist with the statewide rollout of its new performance framework.

The ACER Leadership Centre also used the technique in a series of leadership development programs delivered to the 'Top 500' Queensland health service executives.

The ACER Leadership Centre provides practical professional development for current and aspiring educational leaders, including networking opportunities, coaching and mentoring services, leadership publications, online resources, professional development opportunities and human resources tools. Ongoing programs include Principal for a Day, Technical Leadership – Thinking and Planning Strategically, and Coaching to Enhance the Capabilities of Experienced Principals.

The Leadership Centre is headed by Dr Neil Carrington, an experienced educator and leader who has worked in a variety of K-12 education settings in Australia and overseas. Mary Cahill, founder of the Principal for a Day program in Australia, is Manager of Leadership Projects.

Further information on the Leadership Centre is available on the website at www.acer.edu.au/leadership-centre ■

ACER endorses national statement



ACER has endorsed a statement of seven principles concerned with enhancing the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and development of children and young people developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY). One of the Alliance's founders and Research Committee members, Dr John Ainley, signed the Commitment to Young Australians on behalf of ACER, along with representatives of a diverse group of other prominent organisations in May. The alliance is funded by federal and state governments, philanthropic organisations and the corporate sector. ARACY has developed a research agenda in consultation with stakeholders, and work has commenced to develop a national clearinghouse and an integrated data network enabling data to be shared across a range of primary research bodies. For more information see www.aracy.org.au

Breakthrough instrument in Autism detection published

ACER Press has published a newly developed Autism detection tool. *Autism Detection in Early Childhood (ADEC)* has been developed by Flinders University psychologist Associate Professor Robyn Young and her team. Following a research breakthrough by Associate Professor Young's team, children as young as 18 months can be diagnosed using ADEC. The ADEC describes 16 specific behaviours. If a child fails to demonstrate these behaviours by 18 months to two years of age it may lead to consideration of an early diagnosis of Autism. More information about ADEC is available from ACER Press online (www.acerpress.com.au) or by phone on 1800 338 402 or (03) 9835 7447.

Employability skills to be assessed

ACER has been awarded a contract by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to investigate ways of assessing the employability skills of senior secondary students. The purpose of the project is to develop nationally comparable assessments and reports of Year 12 students' employability skills. The project has its origins in an ACER report that recommended further work to explore the feasibility of incorporating assessments of employability skills into an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE) for the final years of school. A small piece of work by the University of Western Sydney will complement the ACER work. The study is expected to be completed by the end of 2007.

Research Conference 2007 a success



ACER's Research Conference 2007 was held in Melbourne from 12-14 August on the theme of *The Leadership Challenge - Improving learning in schools*. Some 650 delegates attended the conference, which addressed key issues in building school leadership to improve student learning outcomes. The full conference proceedings and individual papers as well as some presentations from the conference are available from the Professional Learning section of the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au

Leaders exchange expertise through Principal for a Day



Improved partnerships between schools, businesses and the community are expected to be key outcomes of the Principal for a Day event held in Victoria, New South

Wales, Queensland and the ACT. Eighty-four 'Principals for a Day' took part in the Victorian program on 31 August including Victorian Education Minister Bronwyn Pike and federal Treasurer Peter Costello. The program, which is delivered by the ACER Leadership Centre with state government partners, builds relationships between government schools and the corporate world by enabling business and community leaders to spend a day running local government schools, where they meet with students, staff and the wider communities, and are able to experience first hand the issues facing schools. For further information visit www.principalforaday.com.au

Gabrielle Matters appointed IAEA executive secretary

Photo: Chingiz



Gabrielle Matters (left) with Yvana Jones and Janina Drazek, Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) at the Baku conference.

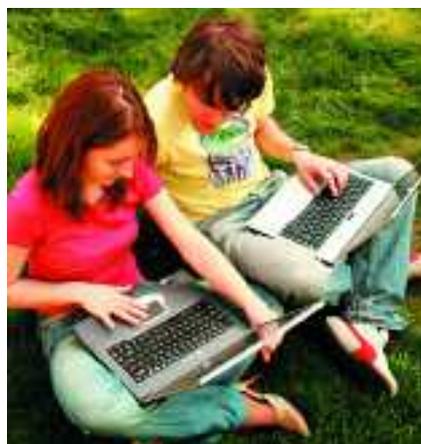
Professor Gabrielle Matters, Principal Research Fellow and Manager, ACER Brisbane, has commenced a term as Executive Secretary of the International Association for Educational Assessment (IAEA) effective from the organisation's conference held in Baku, Azerbaijan in September. Gabrielle has been linked with the association for about 15 years, first while with the Queensland Board of Studies and

then through the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, and has attended and presented at a number of annual conferences at different world venues. For further information on the IAEA visit www.iaea.info IAEA 2009 will be held in Brisbane.

ACER to provide AIM professional development

ACER's Centre for Professional Learning has been successful in its bid for the delivery of the professional development services for the Victorian AIM tests. This contract with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) involves the delivery of 60 half day workshops and 10 full day workshops to between 1000-1500 teachers at locations across Victoria between mid October and Early December 2007.

ICT report released



A newly published ACER research monograph describes Australian students' access to and use of computers raising serious equity issues in the process. *PISA 2003 Australia: ICT use and familiarity at*

school and home uses results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2003 to examine how extensive access to ICT is in schools, homes and other places, how familiar students nearing the end of compulsory education are with ICT and how well they feel they use the technologies that are available. These characteristics are compared to how well students performed in mathematics in PISA 2003. The monograph complements the 2005 OECD report *Are students ready for a technology-rich world?: What PISA studies tell us*, by presenting Australian findings by state, gender, Indigenous background, socioeconomic background and geographic location. It also looks at aspects of the so called 'digital divide', examining access to and use of ICT in Australia. The findings raise issues of equity in Australian education that the authors argue need to be addressed. *PISA 2003 Australia: ICT use and familiarity at school and home* by Sue Thomson and Lisa De Bortoli is published as ACER Research Monograph 62. The publication can be downloaded from www.acer.edu.au Print copies can be purchased online from ACER Press at www.acerpress.com.au

ACER to explore what it means to be Australian

A University of Western Sydney/ACER study is investigating what it means to be Australian through the first national identity survey. Professor Rhonda Craven from the Centre for Educational Research at the University of Western Sydney is conducting a nationwide study in conjunction with Dr Nola Purdie from ACER. The survey is designed to explore different cultural backgrounds and life experiences and will

help to draw a more accurate picture of who we are today and to what extent we identify with our nationality. All Australians of high school age and above are encouraged to take part in the anonymous online survey. Visit www.aussiehaveyoursay.com

Primary schools 'In the Balance'



ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr John Ainley was part of the research team led by Max Angus and Harriet Olney of Edith Cowan University to work on the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) 'In the Balance' report, released in October. The report, initiated by APPA and funded by the Federal Government, found that large numbers of Australian government, independent and Catholic primary schools do not have the capacity to fully achieve the goals set for them by governments, and points to the fact that many of the schools serving low socio-economic communities are acutely under-resourced. The report is available from the APPA website at www.appa.asn.au/

Social and emotional health report released

ACER researchers recently worked in conjunction with Professor Michael Bernard of the University of Melbourne to produce the Australian Scholarship Group (ASG) commissioned *Student Social and Emotional Health Report*. The report, released in October, shows that large percentages of students experience social and emotional difficulties. Girls display significantly higher levels of social and emotional health than boys. It outlines the methodology, key findings, recommendations and actions that parents and educators can undertake to help improve student social and emotional well-being. A series of nine recommendations is made addressing policies, programs and practices for improving the social and emotional health of all students. The ASG *Student Social and Emotional Health Report* is available from the Australian Scholarships Group website at www.asg.com.au

Identifying dangers in the world of 'Cyberia'



Dr Michael Carr-Gregg

Leading adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, in conjunction with ACER's Leadership Centre, delivered a series of seminars on the important issues of 'cyber safety,' across Australia in November and December.

The seminar series explored the world of 'Cyberia' and how young Australians live

there. According to Dr Carr-Gregg, the greatest danger to children and teens online comes from their own peers. His one-day intensive seminars focused on the impacts and outcomes of young people's use of social networking sites, cyber bullying, internet addiction, filtering software and online games.

Australian Education Review 52 examines literacy research



Australian Education Review number 52, *Literacy Education in School: Research perspectives from the past, for the future*, by University of Sydney Professorial Research Fellow Peter Freebody, was released by ACER on 21 November. The review's Foreword is by Professor Barry McGaw, Director, Melbourne Education Research Institute. The review aims to expand our understanding of literacy at a time when public and private lives have become increasingly literacy dependent, and literacy demands more complex and sophisticated. It brings together a rich variety of past and current research and encourages policy makers, researchers, and practitioners not to exclude a historical perspective of literacy education research, arguing that from the past we can learn lessons that can lead us forward. AER 52 is available for download from the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au. Print copies can be purchased from ACER Press. Contact customer service on (03) 9835 7447 or via email on sales@acer.edu.au



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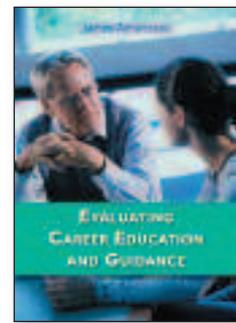
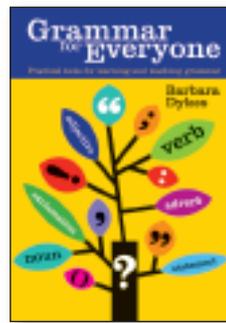
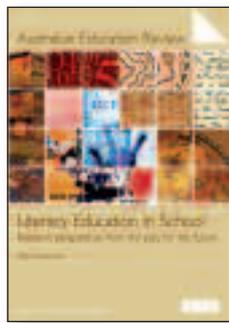
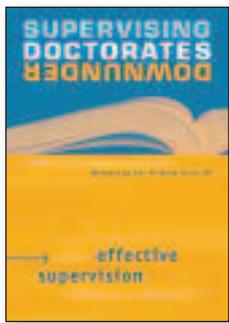
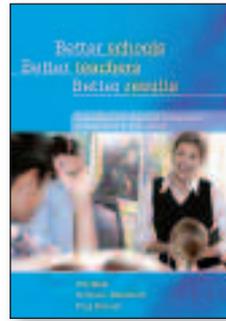
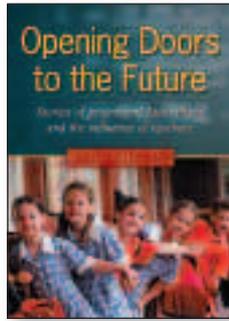
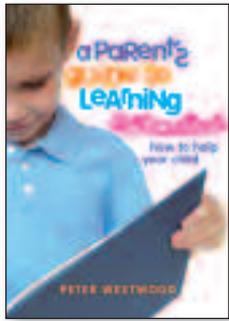
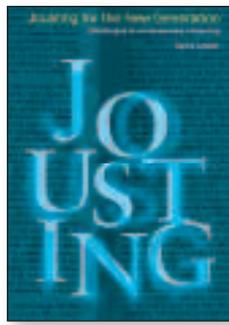
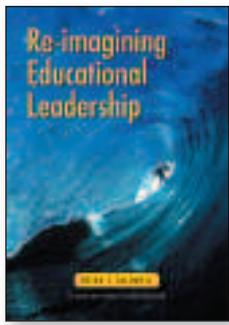
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