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Published April 2008

In this issue:

- [Do schools matter for early school leaving?](#)
- [Better focus required on principal career paths and roles](#)
- [University students less engaged than US counterparts](#)
- [ACER UPDATE](#)

## Do schools matter for early school leaving?

School completion is viewed as a major policy issue in Australia. Early school leavers are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and accumulate less wealth over their lifetime. Policy makers are particularly concerned with the role of schools in early school leaving, with a view to policy intervention. If individual schools have important effects on school leaving, then policies could be introduced in particular schools to reduce early school leaving. However, such policy interventions would be less appropriate if schools or school factors do not make substantive independent contributions to school leaving.

School completion in Australia has increased substantially from around one third of secondary school students in 1980 to about three quarters in 2005. More recently, policies implemented to increase participation include broadening the curriculum, restricting unemployment assistance for school leavers, expanding vocational education in secondary schools and increasing the minimum school leaving age. However, despite these policy interventions, school retention has increased only marginally by about 3 percentage points since the mid 1990s. One explanation is that non-academically inclined students are choosing to enter the labour market or participate in post-school education rather than complete school.

A recent study by Dr Gary Marks, Principal Research Fellow at ACER, concluded that schools do not have a strong independent influence on school leaving. Some schools do have substantially higher or lower levels of school leaving than expected given their students' characteristics, but there are relatively few such schools and they do not vary in an identifiable, systematic way from other schools.

Published April 2008

The study demonstrates how important student achievement is, with effects about four times stronger than that for students' socioeconomic, social, and cultural background. This effect of student achievement on leaving school cannot be attributed to socioeconomic background. Therefore, it is the academically weaker students who are far more likely not to complete school. Socioeconomic background does have a weaker effect, with lower socioeconomic background students more likely to not complete school even when taking into account student achievement. Boys, students from non-metropolitan areas, and students living in non-traditional families are more likely to leave school than comparison groups, regardless of achievement.

The study has implications for policies on school completion which assume that school leavers would be better off if they completed school. Since school leavers are predominately low achievers, it is unlikely that an extra year or two in the academic environment of upper secondary school would be beneficial to their labour market prospects. Resources may be better directed by providing appropriate post-school education and training once they have entered the labour market.

This research is based on a longitudinal study of 10 000 students first contacted in 2003 for the PISA study. By 2005 there were more than 8600 respondents in 315 schools. Early school leavers were defined as those who left before beginning Year 12, or before September of Year 12.

To purchase the article [follow this link](#).

Reference:

Marks, Gary N. (2007) 'Do Schools Matter for Early School Leaving? Individual and School Influences in Australia', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 18:4, 429 – 450.

Published April 2008

## Better focus required on principal career paths and roles

Building communities of professional learners is the key to meeting Australia's school leadership challenge a new review of research has concluded.

The Australian Education Review 53: *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*, written by University of Tasmania researcher Professor Bill Mulford, draws on papers from ACER's 2007 Research Conference and many other contemporary sources within the leadership research literature to address and provide a focus for the issues facing Australian school leadership.

"It is clear from the research that the task of leading a school is now too complex and demanding a job for one person," Professor Mulford said. "Improving schooling over time requires the enhanced capacity, not just of one person, but of many."

Advances in science and technology, changes in demography, increased globalisation and pressures on the environment are causing education organisations to broaden and personalise curriculum and to rethink school structures and the role of the principal within them.

"The old but continuing attempts to improve schools in a small number of areas by top down political and bureaucratic means, has failed. On the other hand, research evidence is clear in its support for the advantages of building social capital within schools, among and between schools as well as between the school and its community," Professor Mulford said.

The review calls for more research and policy attention to be given to the career paths of school principals in order to meet the challenge of identifying and developing the next generation of school leaders.

"The challenges associated with succession planning will be best dealt with by local solutions developed by groups of schools taking responsibility for developing their talent pools and career paths."

Australian Education Review number 53, *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*, by Bill Mulford with a foreword by Geoff Southworth, Deputy CEO and Strategic Director of

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Research and Policy at the National College for School Leadership in England, is available for [free download from this website](#).

Print copies can be purchased from [ACER Press](#). Contact customer service on 1800 338 402 or via email on [.\(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](#)

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## University students less engaged than US counterparts

Australian and New Zealand tertiary students are less engaged with their universities than their North American counterparts according to results from the first administration of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE).

More than 9000 students from 25 Australian and New Zealand universities participated in the survey in 2007. The public report was released by ACER in early April.

Results reveal that, on average, Australian and New Zealand students find their study slightly less academically challenging than students in the US. They report lower levels of contact with teaching staff and are less likely to have participated in activities described as 'enriching educational experiences.' For instance, while 53 per cent of later-year US students had participated in a practicum, internship, fieldwork or clinical placement, only 28 per cent of Australasian students had taken part in such an experience.

Generally, the responses of Australian and New Zealand students became more positive between first year and later years of study. However, students believed they received less support from their universities over time.

Students in Education and Health fields reported the highest levels of engagement and students in the Information Technology field reported the lowest.

Students who work between one and 30 hours tended to report higher levels of engagement than students who do not work and those who work for more than 30 hours per week.

According to the AUSSE Director, Dr Hamish Coates, student engagement data provide an important source of information on educational quality.

"When universities offer students an environment that is supportive of their learning efforts, students are more likely to provide positive evaluations of their educational experience and report that they would attend the same institution if they were to start their course again," he said.

Published April 2008

“The results suggest that students feel their educational experience has been most valuable when they are challenged to learn in a supportive environment and have encountered work-relevant learning experiences.”

Participating institutions were provided with AUSSE institution reports including the institution's own survey data in November 2007.

The public report presents an overview of the AUSSE, key results and summary information on how institutions may use the results to enhance student engagement and learning.

The full public report, *Attracting, Engaging and Retaining: New Conversations About Learning* and background information about AUSSE can be found at [www.acer.edu.au/ausse/](http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse/)

Published April 2008

## ACER UPDATE

### Masters takes part in 2020 Summit

ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters took part in the 2020 Summit in Canberra earlier this month. He was part of the Summit's early childhood and school education sub-stream. It identified the need for more seamless, national approaches to our most pressing educational challenges – including a greater focus on development in early childhood and on the needs of Indigenous students and students living in remote and disadvantaged areas of Australia.

A question posed at the Summit was: What would it take for Australia to develop the best education system in the world? Many ideas were proposed, but there was general agreement that keys included addressing the needs of disadvantaged and low-achieving students; ensuring that every child has access to an excellent teacher; investing more in education and training; and encouraging local partnerships between schools, businesses, parents and their communities.

### Assessment tool for the hospitality industry

ACER Press has been selected, from a number of submissions, to provide advice and supply an assessment tool, the Work Personality Index, which will be used for the recruitment of a range of positions in the Hospitality industry. Organised through the peak industry body, the Restaurant & Catering Association (RCA), the proposal has been given federal government approval and funding. The hospitality sector is one of the largest employers of people in Australia and it is anticipated, by the RCA, that approximately 1,000 businesses a year will be using the tool to help with the selection of staff. Work has begun on developing a Hospitality Profile template, which is the first stage of this project.



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