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Students must meet minimum standards to complete schooling

After 13 years of schooling all students must have fundamental skills and understandings essential to successful functioning as an adult member of Australian society and the workforce according to Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) chief executive Professor Geoff Masters.

Professor Masters told delegates to ACER's Research Conference 2008 in Brisbane on 11 August that the skills and knowledge students need for life beyond school go well beyond proficiency in the traditional '3 Rs'.

He argued that in addition to developing basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy, every student completing 13 years of school should be expected to meet at least minimal standards of scientific literacy, ICT literacy, and civics and citizenship knowledge.

He observed that employer groups also are calling for greater attention to the development of employability skills such as planning and organising, teamwork, initiative and enterprise, self-management and skills for learning.

"A fundamental purpose of schooling is to provide every student with knowledge and skills to equip them for life beyond school," Professor Masters said. "But most students can complete 13 years of school and be awarded a senior certificate without having to demonstrate at least minimally acceptable levels of proficiency across a range of essential skills and understandings."

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Professor Masters called for the establishment of minimally acceptable achievement standards in a set of skill domains that all students would be expected to reach after 13 years of school. Under the plan, a range of stakeholders would set benchmarks for what they considered to be minimally acceptable levels of knowledge and skill in particular domains.

“Minimally acceptable standards would not be tied to any particular year of school, but would be standards that every student would be expected to reach at some point in their schooling, and all students should reach by the time they leave school,” Professor Masters said.

Professor Masters’s paper and presentation are available on the [ACER Research Conference 2008 web page](#).

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Educators urged to respond to 'civilisational challenge'

The single most significant omission from educational thinking and practice is the absence of any kind of effective futures studies according to futures expert Professor Richard Slaughter.

Speaking at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) annual conference in Brisbane on 11 August, Professor Slaughter said this situation has become indefensible. He called on educators to take very seriously what he describes as the 'civilisational challenge.'

According to Professor Slaughter, futures concepts, tools and other resources will be invaluable in assisting students to face an approaching 'perfect storm' comprised of climate change, regional environmental collapse, peak oil disruptions and economic crises, all exacerbated by continuing strife between different world views.

"Educators must first stand up for what they believe in as professionals, to nurture the young and prepare them for living and working in a globally connected but unsustainable society," Professor Slaughter said.

He challenged educators to see these issues as intimately bound up with all aspects of teaching and learning and presented key requirements for educators.

The first and core requirement is that educators look beyond their studies, offices and classrooms and inform themselves not only about the dimensions of the global challenge but also their implications for over dependent societies. Educators must also begin to seriously build on the wide range of futures work and initiatives that have occurred in various educational environments, both here and abroad.

"Having an early grounding in futures concepts and tools will assist young people in their transitions to life and work," Professor Slaughter said. "With these foundations they are better equipped to develop active and informed responses to futures that most adults can still scarcely bring themselves to imagine."

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Richard A Slaughter is a writer, practitioner and innovator in Futures Studies and Applied Foresight. He is currently Director of Foresight International, an independent company dedicated to building the Futures field, and facilitating the emergence of social foresight.

Professor Slaughter 's paper and presentation are available on the [ACER Research Conference 2008 web page](#).

Further information on futures research is available from [Professor Slaughter's Blog](#) and from the website of [Foresight International](#).

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Secondary school reform needed to lower youth unemployment

The education system pumps far too many poorly qualified and inadequately skilled young people onto a labour market that has little need for them, and only reform to the model of secondary education can address the problem, according to education expert Professor Richard Sweet.

Professor Sweet, of Sweet Group and the University of Melbourne, presented his views in a keynote address at the ACER annual research conference in Brisbane 12 August.

Professor Sweet contends that a low level of Year 12 completion results in too high a rate of teenage unemployment despite a strong and youth-friendly labour market.

The education system must shift to a universal structure of separate senior high schools to address this problem. Australia is one of the few OECD countries that does not divide lower and upper secondary education.

The Australian model has failed to convince many disengaged 15- to 18-year-old students to complete Year 12. These students need a more adult learning environment, not one based upon the discipline demands of 12-year-olds, Professor Sweet argued.

Separate senior schools would allow for larger grade cohorts and thus a wider curriculum, a greater range of more interesting subjects to choose from, and a more adult learning environment. Teachers in such schools would be better able to provide adult teaching styles and discipline policies, and support services such as remediation, counselling and welfare for those who struggle the hardest.

"We must create institutions that can foster a joy in learning among the full range of young people after the age of compulsory schooling, not just among those who find academic achievement easy," Professor Sweet said.

"The new model must embrace a genuine education revolution in which all young people move, at the end of compulsory schooling, to an institution designed for their needs and able to offer them a choice of subjects and a way of learning that suits all of their aspirations and expectations."

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Professor Richard Sweet heads the international education and training policy consultancy Sweet Group and is a Professorial Fellow in the Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Melbourne.

Professor Sweet's paper and presentation are available from the [ACER Research Conference 2008 web page](#).

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Teaching citizenship skills may prevent civil conflict

Australia must build people's skills for citizenship as well as work, argues Monash University Professor of Education Terri Seddon.

Recent policy reform has emphasised skills for work but forgotten to consider how people develop skills for citizenship, Professor Seddon told the ACER research conference on 11 August.

The primary goal of schooling is to prepare young people for productive and responsible adult lives as workers and citizens, she contends.

Schooling also disciplines individuals in ways of knowing, interacting with others and using power as equal and responsible decision makers in citizen-communities.

Examples of civil conflict in recent years, such as 2005's Cronulla riots, show that some young people are not using this power in a responsible way. This suggests a breakdown in the function of education to teach citizenship skills, yet there has been little action on tackling the development of these skills.

"Violence in Australia despite a booming economy and an assertive government is a stark reminder that nations have to be made and remade culturally, as well as economically," Professor Seddon said.

"An identity as citizen is as important as an identity as worker in forming sustainable communities that transcend social and cultural divisions and conflicts."

According to Professor Seddon, young people must learn citizenship skills if they are to exercise power responsibly. The way citizenship skills are taught and learned, and the way citizen action is endorsed and authorised, influences the construction of individual and community identities.

"Citizenship skills must be not just explicitly taught but also effectively modelled within educational institutions," she said.

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This has implications for teaching expertise – the way it is organised, endorsed and authorised in schooling, society and in diverse workplaces and community settings where people learn.

“If teachers model practices of power based on domination and subordination, which are often experienced as bullying and compliance, is it surprising that young people play out bullying practices?”

Terri Seddon is Professor of Education at Monash University. Her paper and presentation are available from the [Research Conference 2008 web page](#).

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ACER UPDATE

Research Conference 2009

ACER's fourteenth annual research conference will take place in Perth from 16-18 August 2009 at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre. The theme for Research Conference 2009 is *Assessment and Student Learning: Collecting, interpreting and using data to inform teaching*. Further information about the conference will be posted on the [Professional Learning section of the ACER website](#) as it becomes available. Enquiries may be directed to Margaret Taylor in ACER's Centre for Professional Learning by phone on 03 9277 5403 or by email to [.JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address](#). Information available to date is included in the conference flyer.

Special address by The Hon. Julia Gillard

The Hon Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Education and Minister for Social Inclusion delivered a special address to the ACER Research Conference on 11 August. Ms Gillard's address focused on the connection between education, employment and social inclusion. A recording of the address is available from the [Research Conference 2008 web page](#).

Conference proceedings and audio recordings available online

The full conference proceedings and individual papers from Research Conference 2008 are now available online. Power Point presentations and audio recordings are also available from sessions. These can be downloaded from the [conference web page](#).

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Introduction

Research Conference 2008 special edition

The following articles are based on papers presented at the ACER Research Conference 2008, held in Brisbane, 11-12 August 2008 on the theme of *Touching the Future: Building skills for life and work*.

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