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Targeted teaching of civics and citizenship badly needed in Australia

Formal education in civics and citizenship is urgently required if Australian students are to increase their familiarity with key historical civic events, civics knowledge and understandings and citizenship dispositions and skills, the results of the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship Years 6 and 10 show.

The results of a nationwide assessment of civics and citizenship knowledge of Year 6 and Year 10 students, conducted by ACER and commissioned by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) showed gaps in their understanding of the tested concepts.

The National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship Years 6 and 10 Report, released in late December, found that young Australians seemed to appreciate their democracy, but their level of knowledge and understanding of civics and citizenship was less than was expected by a range of experts in the field.

ACER was contracted by MCEETYA to undertake the assessment of a national sample of more than 20,000 Australian Year 6 and Year 10 students in approximately 600 schools in 2004. The assessment comprised multiple choice and open-ended response questions on concepts such as the rationale for the citizenship pledge, social responsibility, basic historical and political facts and the impact of influencing factors such as the media on democracy.

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Half of Year 6 students and 39 per cent of Year 10 students met defined proficiency standards in Australian civics and citizenship knowledge. Students lacked knowledge of key information about national events and nationally-representative symbols – such as Australia Day, ANZAC Day, and the role of the Governor-General.

Students also notably struggled with the concept of "the common good" – strategies that refer to how individuals can influence systems for the benefit of society. They either didn't understand it, didn't believe in it, or couldn't see how they could exercise it.

"The results of this assessment indicate a need for a greater emphasis on civics and citizenship education in schools," said ACER chief executive Professor Geoff Masters. "It is important that Australian students develop a sound understanding of how Australia's government and democracy work in order to participate fully in society."

Two of the findings that surprised researchers involved Australian history. Only 16 per cent of Year 6 students and 23 per cent of Year 10 students could correctly name the event commemorated on Australia Day. Further, only 17 per cent of Year 6 and 27 per cent of Year 10 students could articulate why Australia Day was sometimes called Invasion Day.

Students also struggled to explain the significance of iconic symbols and events such as aspects of the Australian flag and ANZAC Day. The role of the Governor General provided another stumbling block with only seven per cent of Year 6 students and 23 per cent of Year 10 students able to correctly identify official vice regal duties.

While the researchers and the experts from state and territory education authorities were somewhat surprised and disappointed at the results, they recognised that students could not have been expected to achieve the relevant proficiency standard having not had any formal, consistent curricular instruction in civics and citizenship.

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ACER will also conduct the next phase of the MCEETYA National Assessment Program - Civics and Citizenship in 2007. Preparation work is underway for the 2007 assessment which will involve a sample of around 14,000 students at Year 6 and Year 10 levels in over 600 schools. When results from the 2007 assessment are analysed it will be possible to determine whether improvement has been made since 2004.

The National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship, Years 6 and 10 report, published by MCEETYA is available online from <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/>

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Harnessing insight into effective academic leadership

A University of Western Sydney/ACER survey into leadership of teaching and learning in higher education is underway as Hamish Coates explains.

National research involving half of Australia's universities is underway to explore the capabilities involved in leadership of teaching and learning in higher education. The findings have the potential to play an important role in shaping future leadership development.

Leaders of learning and teaching at these institutions were invited to take part in a survey seeking information about the contexts and challenges leaders face and the key capabilities which underpin their work. The sample included people with formal leadership responsibilities, as well those who had received recognition for making an individual or group contribution to teaching and learning at their university.

Although there is a lot of generic literature on 'leadership', primarily from the business sector, the amount of empirically based leadership material situated in the unique operating context of higher education in Australia is more limited. It is critical we develop a strong picture of what capabilities are central to effective change leadership in the unique context of higher education learning and teaching. The survey was distributed in November 2006 and received a high level of response. It seems that taking part gave leaders an opportunity to reflect on their daily work, their thoughts on what constitutes effective leadership and the key qualities and most effective means for learning leadership.

Early results are providing fascinating insights into perceptions of leadership. While stated formally in portfolio descriptions, the data is bringing out what the work actually involves. Differences are emerging between formal descriptions and of how these play out in practice, differences which help to target support and development activities in the most efficient ways.

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The project is identifying what Australian higher education leaders see as the key criteria for judging effective performance in their roles. As prior research suggests, various aspects of emotional intelligence are important in effective forms of leadership. Role-specific skills and knowledge are required, but it is the capacity to read situations, choose appropriate responses, and convert these effectively into practice which really differentiates effective leadership performance.

Asked to provide an analogy for leadership, respondents have likened it to "being responsible for a big dysfunctional family", "being a swimmer paddling hard to keep his head above water", "gardening with friends" and "being a candle which consumes itself to light the way for others".

Once the findings have been compiled they will be used to enhance the work and development of higher education leaders. The study will produce an empirically validated leadership capability framework, an evidence-based profile of effective academic leadership in different learning and teaching roles, resources and strategies that institutions can use to develop leadership and a methodology for linking the framework with leadership recruitment, development and review.

Interest is already developing in replicating and benchmarking the study internationally. Early conversations are under way with Higher Education South Africa and the UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. The study is funded by the Carrick Institute and led by Professor Geoff Scott from the UWS and ACER.

By Dr Hamish Coates, senior research fellow, ACER.

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ACER UPDATE

ACER joins ANTRIEP

ACER has been accepted into the Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning (ANTRIEP).

ANTRIEP was formed in 1995 with the aim of facilitating increased interaction between a number of Asian institutions that are involved in training and research in educational planning and management and to help them engage in cooperative activities. ANTRIEP is supported by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). It was considered that such a network would effectively harness the capacity building potential available within the region by strengthening individual member institutions and placing them in a better position to respond to the training needs of their respective countries. ACER joined ANTRIEP in November 2005. ACER already has close links with several ANTRIEP member institutions through other networks and we now look forward to making contact with the wider network of institutions involved in ANTRIEP.

VicRoads Motorcycle Knowledge Test

ACER has been awarded the contract for the Redevelopment of the VicRoads Motorcycle Knowledge Test. The contract involves writing and trialing over 300 items that will be based on the Victorian Rider Handbook. The motorcyclist Training Providers will assist ACER in trialing the items. The project will be completed by July 2007.

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