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Australian Certificate of Education

A single Australian Certificate of Education (ACE) to replace the current curriculum and assessment arrangements in the final years of secondary school across Australia is the main recommendation of a new ACER report commissioned by the Federal Government. The report, *Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring a way forward* was released by Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop on 5 May.

Six recommendations are made including the introduction of a single Australian Certificate of Education that eventually would replace the existing nine Year 12 certificates currently awarded by the states and territories.

It urges the establishment of national 'subject panels' to identify curriculum essentials in mathematics, English, science and humanities subjects as well as the development of internationally-benchmarked achievement standards.

The report also calls for a greater focus on the development and assessment of 'employability skills' important to life and work beyond school.

The report's lead author and chief executive of ACER, Professor Geoff Masters said the changes called for in the report are necessary if Australia is to maintain a world-class education system into the future.

"It is hard to see how current differences from one state to another are in the best interests of students, their parents, universities or employers," Professor Masters said. "Currently there is no guarantee that students studying the same subject in different parts of the country are taught a common core of fundamental facts, concepts and skills in that subject. Students' subject results are reported in ways that make comparisons across states impossible and there is significant duplication of effort."

The report calls for clarity about core curriculum content to which all students should have access, regardless of where they live in Australia; the development of more comparable subject results at least in English, mathematics, and key science and social science subjects; and the investigation of ways of assessing employability skills in the final years of school.

The report is available from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website.

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New report challenges crisis accounts of youth labour market

"Crisis" accounts of the youth labour market are not supported by a new ACER report released on 18 May. The report also disputes claims that young people who are not fully engaged in full-time work or study are "at risk" of an unsuccessful school-to-work transition. While some young people are experiencing severe difficulties in the transition from school to full-time work, this group probably comprises less than 10 per cent of non-university bound school leavers.

An analysis of the labour market outcomes of 5500 young Australians who did not go to university has found generally positive employment outcomes that improved with time. The group was first surveyed in Year 9 in 1995 and tracked through to 2002 when their average age was 21 and they had been out of school for between four and six years.

In the first year after leaving school, 61 per cent of young men and 45 per cent of young women were working full-time. A little over half of young male and a third of female full-time workers were also studying part time. Twelve per cent of women and 6 per cent of men were working part time while 27 per cent of women and 20 per cent of men were studying full-time. About 9 per cent of both men and women were unemployed with a further 2 per cent not studying or in the labour force.

By the fourth year after leaving school about 77 per cent of males and 65 per cent of females were in full-time work. The type of work also changed over time: higher proportions moved into professional and skilled jobs, earnings increased, and job satisfaction improved. Most of those who had started in part-time jobs moved into full-time employment by the fourth year.

Such findings show that the youth labour market is highly dynamic and today's youth are a diverse and very mobile group. A young person engaged in part-time work or study in one year does not necessarily remain in that position over a long period of time. Tracking their progress for several years enables us to better understand the transition from school to work.

Full-time work shows a high degree of stability. Approximately 90 per cent of young men in full-time work at the time of the survey in one year were in full-time work the next year. For young women the stability of full-time work was lower, but still very high, at around 80 per cent.

The group studied has benefited from a strong economy and decreasing unemployment rates. Their employment outcomes may not be as positive in times of economic downturn and high unemployment.

The situation of those who are not studying or in the labour market, often referred to as being engaged in 'other' activities, is more complex. This should not be understood as tantamount to being in unemployment. 'Other' activities often include travel, and in the later years comprise a high proportion of young women looking after their own children. Some disillusioned job-seekers are also likely to be in this category.

Post-school activity varies according to demographic and social background factors, but apart from Indigenous status and to a lesser extent language background, differences by social group in post-school activity are small. Similarly, many educational factors are associated with post-school activity – strong achievements in literacy and numeracy, holding a part-time job while at secondary school, and participating in VET at school help to obtain full-time employment, but few of these factors lead to large impacts. An important exception is participation in apprenticeships, which among young men strongly promote full-time work. Traineeships also promote full-time work, especially among young women, but to a lesser extent than apprenticeships.

In contrast to the modest influence of most social and educational background factors, post-school destinations are strongly associated with previous labour market experiences. Obtaining full-time work soon after leaving school substantially increases the chances of remaining in full-time work. Similarly, initial experiences of unemployment are associated with an increased likelihood of being unemployed later on. Gaining full-time employment early in the school-to-work transition is critical.

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The results from this report also suggest that treating those who are not in full-time work or study in the initial period after leaving school as being the "at risk" group is simplistic. Young people not working or studying full-time are quite diverse and face markedly different circumstances, not all of which are likely to lead to problems in securing full-time employment in the future. Therefore there is a need to develop a more sophisticated measure of "at risk" which takes into account a broader range of factors.

The transition to full-time work of young people who do not go to university by Gary N Marks is research report number 49 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program, conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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ACER UPDATE

Principal for a Day

ACER's Australian Principals Centre has taken on the management of the Principal for a Day program, where leaders from corporate, political and community life have the opportunity to learn about what it takes to run a government school.

The program promotes productive communication between schools, business, industry and the wider community. After the school visits, forums are held so the business and community leaders and the principals can discuss their experiences and ideas for continuing relationships. The program began in Victoria in 2001, before expanding into NSW, the ACT and Queensland. Further information is available at http://www.acer.edu.au/leadership/principal-for-a-day

Victorian Global Education Project

ACER has been commissioned to extend its 2003-2005 evaluation of the *Victorian Global Education Project* for the Geography Teachers' Association of Victoria.

ACER will evaluate the effectiveness of professional development sessions offered to pre-service teacher education students and to teachers in schools. The major focus of this next phase will be on evidence of the impact of the project activities on teaching practices. A report is due in January 2007. The GEP is funded by the Australian Government AusAID Programme.

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CEET Seminar

The Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) will be conducting a seminar entitled *Plugging the skills gap - Approaches to career development in the British healthcare system*, in Melbourne on 1 June. The seminar will be presented by Dr Paula Hyde and Dr Anne McBride of the University of Manchester. It will be held at the Department of Human Services Conference Centre, Lonsdale Street Melbourne from 11.00am-12.30pm on Thursday 1 June. The seminar, hosted by the Service and Workforce Planning Branch, Department of Human Services, is free-of-charge with all welcome.

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Learning from failure

This article by ACER chief executive Professor Geoff Masters is a condensed version of an article to be published in a forthcoming edition of Professional Educator. The full version of 'Learning from 'failure'" will appear in Professional Educator 5(3) in August. Visit http://austcolled.com.au/publication/professional-educator

In July 2005 a proposal was put to the annual conference of the UK Professional Association of Teachers that the concept of 'failure' be removed from the British education system. Education Secretary Ruth Kelly dismissed the suggestion, as did an overwhelming majority of British commentators. The proposal was variously rejected as the latest hare-brained notion of liberal/progressive educators; a misguided effort to shield students from the reality of failure in life; and yet another attempt to erode educational standards by treating any performance as acceptable and pretending that all students can succeed.

Failure is something that all students experience at some level, both in school and out of school. In common with the rest of the human race, students sometimes fail to achieve what they set out to do, fail to communicate intentions, to solve problems and to complete tasks, raising the question: Why would any educator suggest that the term 'failure' be avoided?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in the observation that an alarming proportion of young people fall by the wayside in our schools. In Australia, as in Britain, many students become increasingly disaffected and disengaged as they progress through school. These students often see themselves as 'failures' of the system and conclude that education is not for them.

Research shows that children who start school well behind their age peers, or who fall behind early in their schooling, tend to fall further behind the longer they are in school. A student judged to be 'failing' in the early years will very likely still be 'failing' much later in their schooling, giving rise to concerns that the repeated identification of school failure may be contributing to levels of alienation and disengagement.

Added to this is evidence that those most affected by failure, or the threat of failure, tend to be students who already have low self-confidence and low self-esteem. For these students, the experience of failure often results in still lower self-perceptions of themselves as learners. It is tempting to conclude from the evidence that, in schools, nothing breeds failure like failure.

In a society that celebrates success and winners, the challenge for schools is not to attempt to protect students from the inevitability of mistakes, disappointments and failures, but to develop in students a healthy attitude towards these features of life.

A healthy attitude to failure can be promoted by:

1. *helping students to view mistakes and failures in the context of their ongoing learning*
2. *helping students to understand the role of failure in progress*
3. *helping students to understand the need for absolute standards in society*

In schools, healthy attitudes to failure depend on classroom cultures that tolerate and expect mistakes and that support and encourage students to take risks. If students are not supported to make mistakes and to fail, then they are not supported to learn and to grow.

In contrast to a learning culture is a 'performance culture' in which the locus of control for learning lies outside the learner. In a performance culture, learning is about competing with other students or about satisfying somebody else's pass/fail criterion.

What is now required is a more sophisticated understanding of 'successful' learning than either of these two extremes: one that takes into account both the absolute standard of achievement expected of students by a particular stage in their schooling *and* the realities of an individual's long-term learning trajectory. A child who is achieving just above the reading standard expected for their age but who made little or no progress over the previous twelve months may be a greater cause for concern than a student who is still performing below the standard for their age, but who made excellent progress over the past year.

The solution to 'failure' in education is not to attempt to shield students from the experiences of challenge and failure, or to try to expunge the word from our education lexicon. Rather, the challenge is to develop in students a healthy attitude to failure: ideally, to see failure as part of life, essential to growth, a temporary setback, and a learning opportunity. Above all, children in our schools need to be encouraged to see failure as an event not a state: to develop a deep belief that, although all humans experience failure, no human is a failure.

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