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In this issue:

- [Year 12 results? We need a common currency](#)
- [Engaging Australian students in university education](#)
- [A Standards-Guided Professional Learning System](#)
- [ACER UPDATE](#)

## Year 12 results? We need a common currency

Q. Your Year 12 son tells you he received a final mark of 19 for English. How should you respond?

A. It all depends on where you live. In New South Wales, marks are reported out of 100, making 19 a very low score. In Victoria, the maximum possible score is 50, making 19 a slightly better result. But in South Australia, where marks are reported out of 20, a score of 19 is definitely worth celebrating. Most other states do not report marks at all. Some (ACT and WA) use A-to-E grades. Others report results as achievement levels such as 'sound' (Qld) and 'commendable' (Tas).

Confused? Many employers say they are. It's like changing currency every time you cross a border. Except it's worse: it's easy to convert Euros to Pounds or Dollars to Yen, but there is no obvious way of comparing Year 12 results across state boundaries. It is not clear whether a score of 80/100 in Accounting in NSW represents a higher or lower level of accounting knowledge and skill than a score of 40/50 in Victoria or how either of these compares to an 'exceptional' result in Tasmania or 'very high' achievement in Queensland.

And the situation is becoming worse. With proposed changes in a number of states, including Queensland, SA and WA, senior secondary arrangements in this country are about to diverge further. With a population less than some American states, Australia now has nine different senior secondary certificates (ten if the International Baccalaureate Diploma is included). Across the country there are bewildering variations in terminology, requirements that make it harder to achieve a certificate in some states than in others, and as many different schemes for reporting Year 12 results as there are agencies responsible for doing this (see table).

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Contrast this with what is happening in Europe where the states of the European Union are collaborating to enhance the consistency and comparability of their educational qualifications. The aim is to increase the international competitiveness of European education, to promote mutual recognition of qualifications across nation states and to facilitate student mobility. Under the so-called Bologna Process, considerable progress has been made towards the development of more consistent higher education arrangements and qualifications.

There was a glimmer of hope at the meeting of Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers of education in Brisbane last month where it was decided to establish a working party to examine the feasibility of developing a common scale for reporting all senior secondary subject results. This proposal, led by Victoria, is a welcome development if it leads to a common language for reporting Year 12 results.

But a common language (such as A to E grades) is only a first step. The bigger challenge – and one that the ministers appear to have taken up – is to ensure that it is just as difficult to achieve an 'A' in, say, advanced mathematics in NSW as it is to achieve an 'A' in WA. This level of consistency requires agreement on how much knowledge, understanding and skill students need to have, and the quality or depth of understanding they need to demonstrate, to receive an 'A' in each state and territory.

And this highlights the next difficulty. Money is money, whether measured in Dollars, Euros or Yen. But can Chemistry results be compared meaningfully from one state to another? The answer to this question depends on how similar Chemistry curricula are across Australia. To the extent that Year 12 curricula vary from one state to another, any attempt to introduce a common reporting language and to compare grades or marks across the country is likely to be of limited value.

Surprisingly, very few attempts have been made to investigate what students are taught in the final years of school in Australia. To what extent are students in different states and territories taught the same facts, principles and skills in a subject such as Economics? Is there a body of fundamental knowledge and big ideas to which all students taking Economics should be exposed, regardless of where they live in Australia? Questions such as these have not been addressed in any systematic way.

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Earlier this year, the Australian Government initiated an investigation into what is being taught in senior school English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Australian History courses. This investigation will tell us whether curricula in these subjects are sufficiently similar to permit the kind of consistency in reporting that the ministers are seeking. It also will provide a basis for thinking about what should be taught, and especially what core content all students taking a subject should have an opportunity to learn. On this question there's bound to be vigorous debate, as there should be in relation to curriculum matters.

As other countries work to break down unnecessary barriers to communication and to teacher and student mobility, it is time for Australia to adopt a more consistent language and common currency for reporting Year 12 results. It's also time for a national debate on what Australian students should be learning in the final years of secondary school, regardless of where they live.

Professor Geoff Masters is chief executive of ACER and author of the report, [An Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring A Way Forward](#)

How Year 12 subject results are reported:

ACT	a grade (E, D, C, B, A)
NSW	a mark out of 100, placing the student's result in one of six 'bands' (Band 1, Band 2, Band 3, Band 4, Band 5, Band 6)
QLD	an 'achievement level' (Very Limited, Limited, Sound, High, Very High Achievement)
SA/NT	a score out of 20, placing the student's result in one of five grades (E, D, C, B, A)
TAS	an 'achievement level' (Preliminary, Satisfactory, Commendable, High, Exceptional Achievement)
VIC	a score out of 50
WA	currently: a grade (E, D, C, B, A) proposed: a 'level' (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) and a 'band' (first/medium/high) within that level

Source: ACER (An Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring A Way Forward).

This opinion article was published by the Sydney Morning Herald on 10 August ( 'Oh, for scores without borders,' by Geoff Masters, [The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 August 2006](#))

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## Engaging Australian students in university education

Australia needs a robust survey instrument for measuring 'student engagement'. As data-driven quality assurance expands in Australian higher education, it becomes ever more important to review the nature of the data on which decisions are made. We need to ensure that the best information possible is used to manage and enhance the quality of Australian higher education.

Student surveys have grown to play a significant role in higher education quality assurance, and in the conversations that students have with their university. Regular national surveys include the Course Experience Questionnaire, Graduate Destination Survey and the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire. A number of multi-institutional surveys are conducted for policy research projects and benchmarking exercises. All institutions survey their students on areas such as overall course quality, teaching quality, the student experience, resource provision and graduate destination.

Australia needs student surveys that provide effective measurement of the most important aspects of university education. Current surveys in Australia are high quality, but they focus on teaching, the general student experience, generic skill development, and the provision of resources and support services. There are pockets of activity, but survey practice in Australia does not sufficiently emphasise what students are actually doing. This is in spite of the growing international trend which considers the measurement of 'student engagement' to be the most salient indicator of the effectiveness of university education.

Student engagement is an idea which captures the broad range of educationally significant interactions that learners have with their study, peers, teachers and institutions. Contemporary perspectives focus on students' involvement with activities and environments which decades of research has linked empirically with high-quality learning. The idea concentrates on a student's active contribution to their learning as well on an institution's provision of educational opportunities. While institutions and teachers need to provide students with the appropriate resources and opportunities to make possible and promote specific kinds of interactions, it is students who hold ultimate responsibility for their learning.

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There is a big difference, for instance, between 'providing quality library services' and 'whether a student is actually using those services in ways known to underpin high quality learning'. There is a big difference between understanding the general student experience at university, and pinpointing people's engagement in activities which are known to lead to learning. How often, for instance, have students pushed themselves to understand things they found puzzling, sought advice from staff on how to improve their performance, or used online learning systems to make their study seem more relevant?

The incorporation of online learning management systems into higher education presents a vivid example. In the last decade, every university in Australia has invested heavily in these expensive and powerful enterprise-wide technologies. These systems have been seen as a means of increasing the efficiency of teaching, enriching student learning, responding to student expectations, maintaining competitive advantage, substituting for campus-based provision, and responding to massive and increasing demands for greater access to higher education. While online learning systems have been woven deeply into Australian university education, in the excitement of adoption and deployment few if any institutions have sought to determine whether students are actually using the systems in ways likely to engage them in productive learning.

Conversations about student engagement have spread rapidly across North America. In 2005, the National Survey of Student Engagement included over 500 USA institutions, growing from 276 colleges and universities in 2000. Over 970 different institutions have participated in this survey in the last six years. The survey has spread to Canada in the last few years, with over 30 universities participating in the latest round. So far in Australia, only two universities have sought to determine whether their students are engaging in learning in ways likely to generate high-quality outcomes. With the increasing internationalisation of higher education, it is vital that Australia does not slip behind other countries in work on the quality of university education. In certain respects, Australia has been a leader in work on the student experience, but it is essential that focus is not limited to first year students or graduates.

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Data on student engagement helps enhance higher education by providing generalisable proxy measures of educational outcomes, and direct measures of involvement in key learning processes. It focuses conversations about educational quality on learning, rather than on more spurious measures such as institutional resources or reputations. By inviting students to consider their participation in good learning practices, the collection of engagement information can itself strengthen students' academic interactions with their university.

Information on student engagement has many possible audiences. It can provide guidance for prospective students about expectations for, experiences with and supports available at an institution. Such information can provide advice for current students on course quality and learning practices. It might provide insight for graduate employers on an individual's involvement with their work. Engagement information is of profound value to university managers and leaders, who can use it for quality enhancement activities, and to understand whether and how students are extracting educational value out of expensive infrastructure and equipment. An accurate understanding of student learning dynamics also plays a critical role in high-quality teaching.

Numbers can have an intuitive and reassuring appeal, but we must ensure they represent the most significant educational phenomena. There is an important gap in the information upon which determinations of quality in Australian higher education are based. Australian higher education institutions presently lack, but would benefit from, a context-sensitive instrument with which to measure student engagement. A performance measure that recognises institutional diversity, yet is capable of providing generalisable information about university education, could play a very important role in assisting Australian higher education institutions to enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

Dr Hamish Coates joined ACER as a Senior Research Fellow in February 2006. He completed his PhD in 2004 at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne. His dissertation on student engagement in campus-based and online education has been [published by Routledge](#).

This opinion article was published in the Higher Education Supplement of The Australian in July ('Engage the entire experience,' by Hamish Coates, [The Australian, 26 July 2006](#))

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## A Standards-Guided Professional Learning System

A national system for professional accreditation for teachers should be introduced to maintain and even improve the quality of schooling in Australia, according to a recent paper by two ACER researchers.

ACER Principal Research Fellow Professor Lawrence Ingvarson and Dr Elizabeth Kleinhenz recently published a paper, *A Standards-Guided Professional Learning System*. The paper was part of the Centre for Strategic Education's Seminar Series.

In most professions, the idea of a Standards-Guided Professional Learning System is well recognised and understood. Becoming a member of a profession usually depends upon practitioners demonstrating, through various processes of certification or accreditation, that they meet advanced standards set by the relevant professional agencies.

However, there are several problems with current arrangements for professional learning for teachers:

- Many professional learning activities still place teachers in the passive role of course attendees; the link between course attendance and change in practice is often left to chance.
- Current arrangements have the capacity to engage only a small number of teachers in the kind of professional learning that leads to significant change in practice.
- There are not clear expectations about what they should get better at with experience.
- There are weak incentives for evidence of professional learning that makes a difference to student learning outcomes.
- The profession has not developed its own professional learning system to encourage long term professional learning that is guided by standards for highly accomplished teaching and endorsed by professional certification.



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In a Standards-Guided Professional Learning System (SGPLS) professionals typically undertake a number of work-based activities in line with a set of profession-wide standards. The purpose of these linked activities is to gather evidence to show that the candidate has met the standards, through a process of professional learning and certification. The evidence-gathering processes, which include substantial reflection on practice, take place over a period of time – typically about a year. The evidence is documented and presented for assessment by peer professionals.

A fully functioning Standards-Guided Professional Learning System has four components:

- Standards that describe effective practice and provide goals and direction for professional learning over the long term;
- An infrastructure for professional learning that enables practitioners to develop the attributes and capabilities embodied in the standards;
- A credible, voluntary system of professional certification, based on evidence that the standards have been attained;
- Selection procedures and career paths that provide recognition and incentives for those who gain professional certification.

The key to increasing the effectiveness of professional learning for teachers on a national scale is the establishment and public acceptance of an independent national professional certification body for education. This body would need to reflect that the quality of learning opportunities that students receive is a shared responsibility between the profession, governments and other employing authorities.

The certifying body would need to nurture and encourage teachers' professional associations as they gain sufficient confidence to articulate standards for what their members should know and be able to do – standards that will enable the profession to play a stronger role in determining long-term professional goals for its members.

The full paper, A Standards-Guided Professional Learning System, can be found at [Centre for Strategic Education \(CSE\)](#) website.

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## ACER UPDATE

### CEET Conference

The Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training will hold its 10th Annual National Conference on 3 November at Ascot House, Ascot Vale Melbourne.

This year's theme is Australian Education and Training: New Policies. The conference aims to consider education and training policies in relation to changes in the Australian population, workforce and economy. Speakers and topics proposed:

- Michael Keating AC, 'Training and employment participation' with responses from Peter Noonan, Mike Long and Fran Ferrier
- Julian Teicher, 'National IR changes and the impact on training'
- Chandra Shah, 'Future growth in the skilled workforce'
- John Ainley, David Curtis & Phil McKenzie, 'VET experiences: what the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth tells us'
- Tom Karmel 'Apprentices and trainees: the future outlook'
- Megan Lilly, 'World class skills for world class industries'
- Andy Smith 'Government support for employer provided training'
- Gerald Burke, 'Spending on education and training. an update'

Further information and Registration Form is available from the [CEET website](#).

### Teaching Australia reports

Teaching Australia has released new reports on professional teaching standards together with a guide to each report. Two of the studies were completed by ACER teams of researchers led by Dr Lawrence Ingvarson. Standards for School Leadership: A Critical Review of the Literature and Standards for Advanced Teaching: A Review of National and International Developments can be downloaded from the Teaching Australia website.

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## Project to Investigate the Current Provision of Indigenous Language Programmes in Schools

The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has commissioned ACER to conduct a comprehensive literature review, a comprehensive mapping exercise to capture what is happening nationally with respect to Indigenous languages in schools, an analysis of existing models of teacher preparation and professional learning, case studies of good practice, and an evaluation of the New South Wales Master-Apprentice model. The project will run from July 2006 to August 2007.

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