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Published August 2001

In this issue:

- [Online school assessment and resources](#)
- [School industry programs](#)
- [ACER Press new titles](#)

Online school assessment and resources

The growing range of online resources for schools now includes a new resource for assessing school outcomes and monitoring student progress. With the growth of the Internet, schools have online access to an expanding range of resources for use in school management. A recent addition to this range provides schools with high-quality materials for monitoring students' literacy and numeracy learning and for collecting data on school leaders', teachers' and middle school students' attitudes and perceptions on a variety of issues.

This new school assessment service, iAchieve, is provided jointly by ACER and the University of Melbourne's Centre for Applied Educational Research (CAER). iAchieve aims to:

- assist schools to integrate authentic assessments in core learning areas into their curriculum programs (initially literacy and numeracy);
- provide descriptive and diagnostic reports of student learning outcomes for teachers, students and parents;
- assist schools to assess leader, teacher and student attitudes and perceptions; and
- benchmark assessment and questionnaire data to inform school improvement programs.

An attractive feature of iAchieve is its simple format and user-friendly interface. Another is the ease with which schools can manage student tests and results online. Upon registration, schools receive an iAchieve School Administration password which allows them to control who completes assessments and/or questionnaires, when the assessments/questionnaires are to be completed, and who receives the individual student, class, year level or school reports.

Published August 2001

Data collected through iAchieve are recorded at the individual level, and individual and summary reports are provided to the school. Questionnaire responses are anonymous and are reported in a summary table. Schools may choose to have ACER mark student responses, providing an independent external audit. ACER and CAER jointly manage quality assurance processes for iAchieve assessments and questionnaires. iAchieve maintains full confidentiality and does not make data available to any other party (without permission of the school).

Ms Wendy Bodey, ACER Project Manager, points out that online assessments allow teachers greater flexibility in administering, marking and checking student work. "The system caters well for small or large numbers of students. A teacher is able to organise for an individual, a small group of students or the whole class to complete an assessment or questionnaire," she said.

"Once students' answers to a question have been marked, they can be sorted by score, allowing teachers to check their marking consistency. This sort of checking is much less time consuming than in paper and pen assessments."

iAchieve began operating in March 2001 in more than 30 pilot schools and will become fully operational later this year. iAchieve General Manager, Mr Graeme Jane, describes the results of the pilot as encouraging.

"Schools have been very positive about the benefits of the service and the appropriateness of the user interface. In fact, some large schools have successfully had up to 75 concurrent users of the system," he said.

"Students enjoy the online system and find it easy to use. Schools appreciate the range of assessments and questionnaires and the flexibility to control, at the school level, who completes the assessments and questionnaires and who receives the reports.

"The other advantage identified by schools, is the ability to interpret their results in terms of a standards framework and to benchmark themselves against other schools," Mr Jane said.

Published August 2001

At present, iAchieve provides online student assessments in literacy and numeracy for Years 5–9. Other assessments will be available in the future, including reading assessments at Years 3 and 4.

“iAchieve provides individual reports which describe a student’s estimated level of achievement in terms of the skills and understandings typically displayed at that level. A diagnostic report is available allowing teachers to explore in detail how a student has performed on particular assessment tasks,” Mr Jane said.

“Questionnaire reports provide overall results as well as the percentage of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with each item, allowing schools to identify differences in the perceptions of leaders, teachers and students, key issues with low and high ratings, and changes in school attitudes over time.”

For further information visit the iAchieve web site at <http://www.iachieve.com.au>, phone (03) 9277 5755 or email info@iachieve.com.au

Published August 2001

School industry programs

ACER researchers have conducted an extensive survey of school-industry programs commissioned by the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (ECEF). The two main purposes of the study were to collect information about school-industry programs provided by schools and to compare progress since the last ACER survey in 1996.

The survey of 488 Australian schools from all sectors and states/territories (with the exception of state schools in Western Australia) found that there has been a major increase in school-industry programs available in secondary schools in the past few years, and a significant increase in student participation in these programs. This development reflects Australia's growing recognition of the importance of vocational learning.

In 1999 an estimated 86 per cent of secondary schools provided opportunities for Year 11 and Year 12 students to spend time learning in a workplace - up from only 46 per cent of schools in 1995. In the same period, the percentage of senior secondary students participating in school-industry programs grew from seven per cent to 19 per cent.

The results are contained in a report, *Witnessing Evolution: A report on the growth of workplace learning in Australian schools to 1999*, by Jeff Malley, John Ainley and Lyn Robinson published by ECEF

Dr John Ainley, one of the authors of the report, said programs for secondary school students that involve learning in the workplace expand options in post-compulsory schooling in important ways.

'This includes widening the range of what can be learned in those years, providing the opportunity for a wider group of young people to learn about the world of work and enabling them to develop skills in settings other than traditional classrooms. This experience can help young people become good learners in settings outside school,' he said.

According to Dr Ainley, the growth of programs in post compulsory education that incorporate structured workplace learning has emerged as a way of widening school curricula to provide more direct pathways to productive adult life.

Published August 2001

'Programs that include learning in the workplace offer the opportunity for young people to make direct links with potential employment opportunities,' he said.

Dr Ainley added that there remains a challenge to better understand the characteristics of workplaces that provide the conditions for effective workplace learning. There is also a practical issue of finding enough workplaces to support the expansion of this aspect of education.

Among the report's main findings are:

- 75% of all schools have VET in schools programs, 28 % of schools had School-Based New Apprenticeship (SBNA) programs and 58% of schools had work experience programs. In terms of number of school-industry programs, 75% are VET, 15% are SBNAs and 10% are other programs
- Over 90% of government and Catholic schools now offer school-industry programs, with only minor variations by state, up from around 70% in 1996.
- Schools are also offering a greater choice of programs and this has contributed to an increase in student participation from 12% in 1996 to 19% in 1999 (growth rates in each state differ)
- Independent schools have increased their provision of school-industry programs from 20% in 1996 to 63% in 1999. However, actual student numbers remain very low and unchanged in the last four years, at 5%.
- Time in the workplace varies considerably by state reflecting policy differences. Queensland and Tasmania have led the way in terms of extended placements of 20 days or more. NSW has significantly more programs with 10 days or less.
- 22% of all Year 11 and 12 students in government schools participate in school-industry programs, a 50% increase on 1996. Students in Catholic schools have increased their participation to 18%. Independent school students have not increased their participation in school-industry programs, remaining at 5%.
- There is considerable diversity of student participation across states. NSW, Queensland and ACT have achieved over 20% student participation. Victoria and Tasmania are at about half this rate. Other states/territories are somewhere in between. The differences appear to be driven by the different policies at state level.

Published August 2001

- The different rates of participation between states in school-industry programs suggest that there is considerable scope for further growth in the total number of students seeking work placements over the next few years.
- Hospitality is the most common program and most popular with students. Business and clerical, computing, and building and construction, are in the second tier of popularity. Non industry-specific school-industry programs are almost as popular as hospitality.
- There are significant gender differences in the take-up of industry-specific programs with girls more concentrated in hospitality, business and clerical, and sales, and much less concentrated in construction and automotive. Boys are more evenly spread across most industries.
- There are significant variations in the types of industries provided by the states. NSW has achieved much of its recent growth with hospitality programs. Automotive and primary-industry programs tend to be in Victoria and South Australia. Tasmania has more community and recreational courses. The provision of computing courses remains at 5% nationally, with Victoria offering about half the proportion of IT programs that NSW offers.
- In the timing of placements, there has been little change since 1996 in the mix between school time only (41%) and school and non-school time (49%). The only exception is the extended courses where there has been a shift from school only to a combination of school and non-school.
- Only 33% of school-industry programs limit to one the number of sites at which the student can work. Two-thirds offer multi-site opportunities (other than apprenticeships) where contractual arrangements ensure that over 80% are single site arrangements). In practice, just over a half of students on short placement remain at one site. For longer placements, two-thirds of students spend time at more than one site.
- Short placement programs are less likely to be part of a cluster arrangement for coordinating placements compared with mid and extended programs (30% versus 50%).
- Less than half the programs with short-term work placements report having a management committee to support them. Three-quarters of programs with extended programs have management committees.

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ACER Press new titles

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Australian Council for Educational Research
Private Bag 55, Camberwell, Victoria Australia 3124
Tel: + 61 3 9277 5555
Fax: + 61 3 9277 5500
Web: www.acer.edu.au

