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Enhancing engagement, standards and capability

Hamish Bennett Coates, ACER

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Enhancing engagement, standards and capability

Universities rely increasingly on evidence-based insights to respond to contexts and opportunities in the most effective ways. This second edition of the Higher Education Update reviews work on university leadership, student assessment and selection, learner engagement and graduate outcomes.

Australian higher education will need a new generation of university leaders over the next decade, and capacity building needs to start soon. Our study of Learning Leaders in Times of Change has identified the capabilities that underpin effective leadership and the Changing Academic Profession survey provides information on academic staff and their work.

Admissions processes play a critical role in enabling people to develop the higher order skills that university education can confer. The new online English Language Skills Assessment identifies incoming students who need further support to develop their English language proficiency. This edition also reports on the international use of the ACER-developed aptitude test uniTEST, and the new Health Professional Admissions Test to assist with university admissions processes.

Participation in higher education is becoming more important in a society that relies increasingly on advanced professional skills. The 2007 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement provides formative insight into learners' educational interactions with their universities. This Higher Education Update also reports on recent large-scale analyses of how different groups of students experience university education.

Universities are searching for new ways to measure learners' transitions and outcomes. The Graduate Pathways Survey captures data on bachelor degree graduates five years after completing their undergraduate degrees, while the On Track survey provides insights into young people's transitions from education to work. An objective assessment of work and career readiness is being deployed to help Victoria University explore new perspectives on the standards of their provision. Research into graduate supply and demand is helping inform planning and policy development.

Together, the Higher Education Update offers insights on how universities are enhancing engagement, standards and capability. We hope you enjoy this review, and welcome your feedback and ideas to highereducation@acer.edu.au.

Dr Hamish Coates
Australian Council for Educational Research
A recent study of Australia’s university leaders has identified the most effective ways to develop leadership.

The Learning Leaders in Times of Change survey, a joint project of the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and ACER, and funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, surveyed more than 500 higher education leaders about the challenges they face in their roles.

The study found that leaders face mounting external pressure for radical change. Such change is not an event but a complex learning process. If change is to be implemented, leaders have to do something new. To do something new requires them to fill a gap in their expertise, to learn. Such learning for change does not just happen – it must be directly assisted and deftly led.

And how best do higher education leaders learn? According to the survey, leaders learn in the same ways as their students.

The survey found that exactly the same flexible, responsive, active, problem-based, just-in-time, just-for-me learning methods found in studies to engage university students in productive learning is what leaders report they want.

The leaders in this study expressed an overwhelming preference for role-specific, practice-based, peer-supported and self-managed learning, rather than the more usual one-off, formal and generic workshop-based types of professional learning. In particular, leaders identified informal mentoring as an effective method of learning leadership, especially if guided by a role-focused diagnostic framework to enable them to make sense of their work and to identify areas of good practice and those requiring improvement.

A key recommendation of the project is that universities should ‘practice what we preach’ by constructing leadership learning programs that model the approaches to learning that are now being advocated for use with higher education students. Professional development for leaders should use case-based and problem-based learning situated in the context of each particular role, and should foster targeted support networks for people working in the same role.

Leaders must become particularly skilled at not only identifying what changes must be made to keep up with the continuous movement in their operating context, but also at making sure these agreed changes are put into practice successfully and sustained.

Or, as Professor Geoff Scott, Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Western Sydney and leader of the research articulates it, ‘Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas.’

The Learning Leaders in Times of Change project has developed a range of products to support an academic leadership capability framework for Australian higher education. In 2008 and 2009, UWS and ACER will convert key findings into an online leadership development resource and pilot the software and approaches at a large number of institutions.

Visit www.altc.edu.au for more information.
Happy thinking: Academics report high job satisfaction

According to a recent national survey, Australian academics are satisfied with their jobs but are critical of the management of their universities.

These findings come from the first analysis of the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey, a joint University of New England (UNE) and ACER project.

The national study on the state of the academic profession, the largest of its kind, surveyed 1,250 academics from 21 Australian institutions.

The research is being led by Dr Hamish Coates of ACER, Professor Lynn Meek, Director of the LH Martin Institute of Higher Education Leadership and Management at the University of Melbourne and Associate Professor Leo Goedegebuure and Dr Jeannet van der Lee from UNE’s Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy.

The results of the survey show that most academics are content with their academic life, with 55 per cent of respondents rating their job satisfaction as high or very high, and only 20 per cent rating it low or very low. About half agreed their job was a source of ‘considerable personal satisfaction’.

According to Associate Professor Leo Goedegebuure, ‘These survey results are all the more remarkable when we take into account the fact that many Australian academics are of the opinion that working conditions in higher education have deteriorated. Almost two-thirds of the respondents believe that this is the case. Only some nine per cent feel that working conditions have improved since the start of their career.’

Professor Meek noted that the high level of satisfaction was a sign of the maturity of the Australian academic profession. ‘While academics are critical of some aspects of their working environment, with the way in which their universities are managed high on the list, they also demonstrate a high degree of professional dedication to their jobs,’ he says.

‘The low rating academics give to the management of their institutions is the result of many factors, the requirement of institutions to be more entrepreneurial and to earn more of their income from private sources two of the key issues. But substantial strain in the relationship between management and rank-and-file staff is not conducive to the effective and efficient running of the organisation,’ according to Professor Meek.

Despite high job satisfaction, many academics consider leaving the profession, with 75 per cent considering major changes in their jobs, including 38 per cent considering working outside the sector. A third of academics have considered a move to another institution, a quarter a move overseas, and 15 per cent a move into management.

Only 30 per cent agree that their management is providing competent leadership. Respondents are particularly critical of top-down management styles, cumbersome administrative processes and inadequate internal communication systems, as well as of secretarial support, teaching support and research support staff.

A summary of the results is available from www.une.edu.au/pdal/research/chemp/projects/cap
Australian universities and TAFEs expend great effort to recruit international students – but are higher education institutions doing enough to support these students once enrolled?

One in three overseas students granted permanent residency after graduating from an Australian university does not have good enough English to handle a professional job, according to results from a 2006 study. Continued concern from employers about some graduates’ poor English-language skills suggests the situation has not improved.

International students applying from overseas for entry to Australian higher education institutions are required to be ‘modest’ or ‘competent’ users of English language, as defined by the International English Language Testing System.

International applicants can avoid sitting the test, however, if they are already living in Australia or have
completed some English-language study when they apply for entry to a higher education course. About 40 per cent of international students gain entry to Australian institutions through such pathways.

While Australian institutions have expressed concern about the poor levels of English-language skills of some international students, many argue that it is not the responsibility of the academic staff to teach English, and that staff members simply do not have the time and resources to do so.

If the problem goes unaddressed, however, not only may institutions be graduating students who are poorly equipped for employment in the Australian workplace; institutions may also be leaving themselves open to legal claims of neglect of duty of care by not having adequate intervention strategies in place to identify and help struggling students.

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) of higher education institutions is addressing the issue by investigating the viability of compulsory English language testing for all students.

The English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA), developed by ACER, is a secure web-based test of English language proficiency that would enable institutions to identify students whose English is a cause for concern.

Specifically developed for tertiary students entering degree or TAFE courses at ATN institutions, the ELSA includes units and items to test students’ skills in reading, writing, listening, grammar and vocabulary. Units and items are optional and the test can be tailored to suit an individual institution or course.

The entire test is assessed online instantly – even the writing components.

The test uses a revolutionary technology that allows students’ writing samples to be assessed online through a system of electronic neural networking.

Because the test is administered and assessed entirely online, large numbers of students can be assessed quickly and simultaneously and with results generated instantly, in a simple and economical manner.

The ELSA will allow institutions to take responsibility for identifying students who need support to develop their English-language skills to a sufficient level to cope with the demands of tertiary study. Based on the results of the ELSA, institutions may also require students to complete English support classes as a condition of course completion, thus ensuring students are aware of the onus on them to develop English skills as a condition of their study in Australia.

According to one of the developers of the ELSA, ACER Research Fellow Mark Butler, the test appeals to students and staff alike: ‘Pilots of the ELSA with three universities have been very successful.

The test is popular with students because it’s quick, modern and student-friendly. The questions and examples deal with issues that are relevant to students, such as rental increase, internet usage and mobile phones, and the students can sit the test in under an hour,’ says Butler.

He says, ‘Essentially the ELSA is a flexible, instant and economical test delivered in a way that students find engaging. It’s a high-quality, low-cost, accurate snapshot of students’ English-language ability.’

For more information, visit www.acer.edu.au/elsa

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Assessing aspiring doctors in Denmark

In many universities around the world, entry into medical school is highly competitive, with demand greatly exceeding available places.

In Denmark, student interest in undertaking medicine is high, as is workforce demand for high-quality medical graduates. The significant costs to universities of providing medical courses, and the need to keep entry standards high, limit the number of places universities can offer. However, the challenges of medical courses, combined with the fact that university education is free in Denmark, results in a relatively high attrition rate, with up to 20 per cent of medical school students leaving their studies before completion.

The Medical School at the University of Southern Denmark (USD) is the smallest of the three medical schools in the country. Each year the school selects 280 students from up to 2,000 applicants.

With such high stakes, it is vital that USD chooses best-fit applicants, to ensure the supply of doctors in Denmark and the economic viability of providing a high-quality medical course.

To choose applicants most likely to make not just good medical students but also good doctors, USD wanted to be able to identify qualities beyond just academic ability. While other medical schools in Denmark admit 90 per cent of their students based on grade point average (GPA) alone, USD obtained permission to admit 50 per cent of their cohort based on broader criteria.

Approximately 140 places are offered to applicants admitted on GPA alone, who USD terms Quota 1 applicants, with 140 places offered to Quota 2 applicants.

All Quota 2 applicants must have a grade point average of a C or equivalent on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, as well as achieving an A grade in Danish and Mathematics and at least a B grade in Chemistry, Physics and English. Quota 2 applicants have traditionally been admitted based on extra criteria, such as work experience, travel experience, previous relevant education, an application letter and an interview.

USD found that applicants admitted to medical courses through this pathway had a very low attrition rate.

In order to continue to recruit these best-fit, Quota 2 applicants, USD turned this year to an Australian-developed assessment, uniTEST, to assist with selection procedures. uniTEST can identify candidates’ cognitive abilities, one of the four qualities USD identified as important for the making of good medical students and doctors.

uniTEST assesses the kinds of generic reasoning and thinking skills that underpin studies at higher education and that are needed for students to be successful at this level.

USD expects the test to help narrow the wide field of applicants down to those students best suited to the medical profession.

Visit http://unittest.acer.edu.au for more information.
Ireland adopts Australian selection tests

Five Irish medical schools will use an admissions test developed by ACER for undergraduate entry to medical courses from 2009.

The Health Professional Admissions Test – Ireland (HPAT–Ireland) will be used as an indicator of candidates’ potential to succeed in medical, dentistry and health science degrees.

In Ireland, which has strict caps on the number of university places available to local students, there are far more well-qualified applicants than there are places available in health sciences courses. Strong demand for places in such courses drives up entry requirements. A single route of entry into medical degrees based solely on academic performance was exerting intense pressure on prospective medical students, who were required to have almost perfect high school leaving scores based on studies in science and mathematics, and non-academic qualities were not being taken into consideration. The introduction of HPAT–Ireland should help alleviate this.

Ireland’s Minister for Education and Science, Batt O’Keeffe, said ‘The quality of medical education and training is an issue of significant national importance. These reforms were sought by the Government to relieve the intense pressures that had come to be associated with the need for extremely high Leaving Certificate points and to broaden entry to medical education.’

The test, developed by ACER in conjunction with an international consortium of undergraduate medical schools, will be used in conjunction with students’ Irish Leaving Certificate results. The medical school admissions process in Ireland does not require an interview.

HPAT–Ireland is designed to assess general attributes and abilities gained through prior experience and learning rather than content knowledge. As such, it is not curriculum-based and does not assume any knowledge or skills in mathematics or sciences, or in any particular area of the curriculum.

The test does not examine academic knowledge, but measures candidates’ capacities for critical thinking, logical reasoning, abstract non-verbal reasoning and problem solving.

The new undergraduate entry system will apply to health sciences courses at University College Cork, University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, the National University of Ireland, and the Royal College of Surgeons.

The first round of HPAT–Ireland will take place in mid-February 2009 at test centres in Cork, Dublin, Galway, the north-west and the south-east.

Commenting on behalf of the Irish medical schools, Professor Bill Powderly of University College Dublin praised the design of the test. ‘A crucial element of the test is that it measures the student’s ability, rather than prepared learning, and this avoids a situation whereby scores could be improved through repeated testing and grind courses,’ he said.

ACER also administers the Undergraduate Medicine and Health Sciences Admission Test (UMAT) for 14 universities in Australia and New Zealand.

For further information visit www.hpat-ireland.acer.edu.au or www.umatweb.acer.edu.au
Starting to know what learners are doing

The 2007 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement offered a first glimpse of whether students are engaging with their university in educationally effective ways.

The Australasian Student Engagement Report, released by ACER in April, presents pictures of engagement and identified how universities can improve learning processes and outcomes.

More than 9,000 sampled students from 25 Australian and New Zealand universities participated in the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) in 2007. Results reveal that, on average, Australian and New Zealand students find their study slightly less academically challenging than students in the United States.

Australasian students report lower levels of contact with teaching staff and are less likely to have participated in activities described as 'enriching educational experiences'. For instance, while 53 per cent of later-year US students have participated in a practicum, internship, fieldwork or clinical placement, only 28 per cent of Australasian students have taken part in such an experience.

Generally, the responses of Australian and New Zealand students become more positive between first year and later years of study. However, students believe they receive less support from their universities over time.

The results show that integrated individual support and high levels of academic challenge stimulate learning and achievement. The quality of relationships with teaching staff, administrative personnel and other students is particularly important for enhancing student engagement.

Satisfaction is comparatively low for international students, students in their mid 20s, and people studying management, commerce, or information technology, and part-time and off-campus students.

In general, students who work for pay on campus report higher levels of engagement than students who do not work. Around three-quarters of students are working for pay off campus, most commonly for a dozen hours a week. Working for pay off campus is not linked with a lowering of engagement unless it occupies more than 30 hours per week. Off-campus workers report greater levels of participation in work-integrated learning.

Overall, the way in which students finance their studies has very little impact on the levels of engagement in their university experiences.

Nearly 60 per cent of students say their experience of university has improved their knowledge and skills and made them more employable. There was considerable variation in different institutions’ scores.

One explanation for the Australasian students’ lower levels of engagement is that while student engagement data is new in Australasian higher education, US institutions have been using the data to guide improvement activities for around a decade.

Now equipped with the AUSSE data on student engagement, Australasian institutions will be able to improve students’ university experiences.

AUSSE workshops conducted in early 2008 involved 250 staff from nearly every university. Two-thirds of Australian and New Zealand universities are taking part in the 2008 collection.

According to the AUSSE Director, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Hamish Coates, student engagement data provide an important source of information on educational quality.

‘When universities offer students an environment that is supportive of their learning efforts, students are more likely to provide positive evaluations of their educational experience and report that they would attend the same institution if they were to start their course again.

‘The results suggest that students feel their educational experience has been most valuable when they are challenged to learn in a supportive environment and have encountered work-relevant learning experiences,’ he says.

The full public report, Attracting, Engaging and Retaining: New Conversations About Learning can be found at www.acer.edu.au/ausse
Investigating the course experience

Understanding student cohorts helps manage the overall experience.

Results from this year’s Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) show that in general, graduates’ satisfaction with their university courses tends to be increasing. This year’s analysis of the CEQ, undertaken by ACER for Graduate Careers Australia as a part of the Australian Graduate Survey, revealed that the most influential factor in predicting course satisfaction is field of education. Other course characteristics such as institution and level of course were also found to be relatively influential in shaping the course perceptions of graduates.

Graduate Course Experience 2007, the latest report of the CEQ, also highlights the experiences of four key groups of students in Australian universities – international fee-paying students, mature-aged students, regional and remote students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This analysis revealed that being a mature-aged student or from a regional or remote area had little impact on course satisfaction scores when other variables such as field of education and institution were controlled for. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, there was some difference in perceptions noted, especially among males. However, among these groups, the most substantial differences in course perceptions were measured for international students, who tended to record slightly more negative perceptions when other factors were taken into account.

The report of the CEQ can be obtained by contacting Graduate Careers Australia www.graduatecareers.com.au
Processes used to allocate the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) have been refined to improve equity, based on advice provided by ACER to the Australian Government.

The LTPF, which allocated $83 million to 23 universities in 2008, uses indicators of learning and teaching performance to allocate funding. The indicators comprise progress rates, retention rates, graduate full-time employment and graduate full-time and part-time study, students’ perceptions of the skills they have gained from their study, their opinions on the quality of the teaching and their overall satisfaction with their course.

The data used for the LTPF are derived from three sources. Progress and retention rate estimates are drawn from the Higher Education Student Collection. Graduate full-time employment and graduate full-time and part-time study indicators are derived from the Graduate Destination Survey. Measures of student perceptions, opinions and satisfaction are drawn from the Course Experience Questionnaire.

The principle of awarding funding to universities based on the quality of learning and teaching has been well received by stakeholders. However, since the LTPF was announced in 2004, the processes used to distribute the funding have generated much discussion in the higher education sector. One of the more debated aspects of the LTPF has been the statistical adjustment process.

The LTPF adjustment process is intended to allow equitable treatment of institutions by controlling for the effects of factors beyond the control of a university that may affect institutional estimates on the seven LTPF indicators. After adjustment, it is more likely that differences between institutions can be attributed to differences in learning and teaching performance.

Different specifications of adjustment factors in the regression analysis will change the institutional estimates to varying degrees, therefore it is important to ensure the specifications are appropriate to the context.

Following the 2006 funding round, the LTPF Advisory Group, which is made up of sector representatives, recommended further work on the adjustment process to ensure that it was appropriate, and as simple and as robust as possible. ACER was commissioned to conduct this further analytical work.

The resulting report, Refinement of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund Adjustment Process, by ACER Principal Research Fellows Drs Gary Marks and Hamish Coates, has now been published by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Drs Marks and Coates recommended that several adjustment factors – unemployment rates, number of students in a course, the level of course, and a student’s age, student location, socioeconomic status, language background and previous experience of higher education – be excluded from the LTPF adjustment process, on the basis that they were not likely to affect institutional estimates to a significant degree.

The authors also recommended that some existing factors be retained only for certain indicators. In particular, they suggested that Indigenous status and admission basis be included for the progress and retention rate indicators; that gender be included for progress, retention and further study; and that disability be included for progress and employment. The authors further advised that narrow field of education be the only adjustment factor for the three indicators of student perceptions, opinions and satisfaction.

The report also proposed that interactions between adjustment factors should not be included in the LTPF adjustment process.

A clear advantage of the recommended model is its parsimony and transparency. It is conceptually strong and empirically valid. This, as a result, is likely to help ensure that the LTPF analysis and allocation process is equitable.

Plotting graduate pathways

A new survey of graduates five years into their careers will help institutions better understand Australian graduate transitions from university to employment.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has commissioned ACER to develop a new national survey, the Graduate Pathways Survey (GPS), which will provide insights on graduate supply and pathways. All Australian universities are taking part in this collection.

The Graduate Pathways Survey will provide new insights on patterns and developments in graduates' early careers. Data about initial entry into the labour market is important, but the foundations of many careers take three to five years to develop. Studying bachelor degree graduates 'five years on' helps identify trends in graduate perceptions of their courses and the relevance of such courses to their future employment pathways.

Currently, growth in occupations that require higher-level skills generally associated with a university degree is greater than growth in any other occupation type in Australia. Employer demand for graduates of Australian universities is high.

There is evidence, however, that insufficient numbers of graduates are being produced in particular fields. A serious skills shortage exists in the sciences and mathematics, for instance, with the Department of Education, Science and Training last year estimating a shortfall of 20,000 scientists and engineers within six years.

The GPS will collect information on graduates' assessments of their skills and employability and their current employment within the Australian labour market. It will also canvas graduates' perceptions of careers advice, university education, and how well they were prepared for the workforce.

With the aim of shaping educational policy and informing practice, the Graduate Pathways Survey will provide insight into the patterns within graduate career pathways, examining such factors as field of education and higher education institution, school background, socioeconomic status and geographical location.

The GPS will consider equity in university graduate pathways. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in higher education than other students, but existing research is divided over whether or not those disadvantaged students who do complete university have similar employment outcomes to the general university population. The GPS aims to provide insight into career trajectories linked to some individual background characteristics.

A robust, well-equipped university graduate cohort is crucial to meeting the employment demands of the Australian labour market. Ensuring that new graduates are aware of work options and career pathways is important for them as individuals, but also for the Australian economy more generally. The aim of the GPS is to provide evidence-based insights into medium to long-term graduate destinations, shape policy and practice in Australia, and hence ultimately shape the careers of graduates and the industries in which they work.

Summary information is available at www.acer.edu.au/gps. ACER will provide a report of project findings to DEEWR in late 2008.
In the highly competitive higher education market, institutions have honed creative marketing down to a fine art – but can they really prove their claims about the value added by their courses?

Victoria University (VU) has set out to do just that, as part of its Making VU a New School of Thought initiative. ACER is leading research on whether VU students and graduates have the skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen careers.

Outcomes from the research will help shape VU’s education and training, and will provide useful feedback to students, staff, potential employers and the community. The results will be used to calculate the ‘VU Student Dividend’ – a measure of the value that VU adds to each student.

The assessment targets a sample of 1,200 TAFE, undergraduate and postgraduate students. It covers VU’s three core course domains, and includes students at the point of entry and prior to graduation. Feedback from a survey of recent graduates will also be incorporated into the analysis.

ACER is developing a package of assessment and survey instruments to measure the VU Student Dividend. These will examine students’ work readiness, career readiness, and future readiness, concepts mapped in a 2007 scoping study by ACER’s Dr Hamish Coates.

Work readiness refers to whether students possess the sets of vocational skills and generic competencies that allow them to move seamlessly into employment, and which cannot be taken for granted.

The ACER-developed assessment of work readiness measures students’ basic aptitudes to function at a competent level in the contemporary workforce. It tests skills in numeracy, reading and writing, communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative, enterprise, planning, organisation, self management and technology.

Measuring learners’ readiness for work, career and the future
Career readiness is about whether students have the skills that are required to manage professional engagements with a changing world.

Assessment of career readiness identifies students’ skills related to an ability to plan for and acquire a job, function effectively within a job, and conceptualise and work towards developing a career. ACER has developed instruments to identify capability in these areas.

Future readiness refers to the skills and qualities that make students self-directed learners, and adaptable and resilient in the changing world of work. Understanding and engaging with community is an important part of the concept.

The assessment of future readiness focuses on skills such as lifelong learning, adaptability and flexibility, resilience, leadership, community engagement, and goals and ambitions.

Young Australians are the most valuable resource for our nation’s social and economic prosperity. A key to such prosperity at the individual and national level is the provision of education and training that leads to increasingly higher levels of capability; deeper understandings of vocational and community needs; more advanced problem solving skills; broader social and employability skills; and greater respect for the rights of others.

Assessing learners’ readiness for work, career and the future will help VU understand and build its education and training activities.

For more information visit www.vu.edu.au/About_VU/Making_VU

ACER is leading research on whether VU students and graduates have the skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen careers.
Research into higher education supply and demand will inform the Victorian government’s policy development.

The Victorian government’s tertiary and vocational education advisory board, Skills Victoria, has commissioned ACER to analyse university student entry and participation patterns.

There is currently much debate about the levels of supply in the university system. Two main drivers of demand are frequently used in determining whether the levels of supply are adequate. One is demand from domestic students. The other is demand for skilled workers within the Australian workforce. Different interest groups use these two means of measuring demand in different ways to estimate whether supply matches demand. Very rarely are both measures incorporated in the same analysis. As a result, analyses of supply and demand for university in Australia have reached vastly different conclusions.

Victoria has a range of different universities catering to a vast array of students. Each university is unique in the students it enrols and the subjects it offers. While certain elements of the enrolment profiles of universities are known, and detailed information relating to their cohorts is held by individual institutions, there is no synthesis of data which provides a broad picture of all the universities in Victoria and the characteristics of their students.

This situation exists despite the fact that there are numerous sources of data that contain valuable information about Victorian universities, students enrolled and admissions processes. Such information is currently under-utilised because it is collected by different organisations, there is a lack of expertise in Australia for collating and analysing large datasets from dispersed sources, and there is a lack of recognition of the usefulness of the information such data can provide.

Using data from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the Victorian Tertiary Admission Centre and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the ACER study will create a profile of university enrolments in Victoria. This profile will investigate individual university differences in the student cohort, identify key areas of supply and areas where participation is particularly low, and explore trends over the past seven years in this regard.

The study will examine the main sources of supply for Victorian universities, how supply differs between Victorian universities, the level of demand for university education in Victoria, and the change in supply and demand dynamics over time.

ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Daniel Edwards is leading the research.

Australia requires a comprehensive method to be established in order to project demand for workers with university qualifications and balance this with the age structure of the population, expected demand for university by young people and estimated skilled migration numbers. The ACER study will contribute towards this development.
Off track: Students defer higher education

A growing proportion of students are choosing to defer university studies or take up apprenticeships, according to new research from the Victorian government.

The research shows that a lower proportion of Year 12 completers are enrolling in university, with many young people, particularly those from rural areas, deferring studies to work for a year to become eligible for youth allowance and cover living costs.

The annual On Track survey, conducted by ACER for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, surveyed more than 33,000 young people who completed the Victorian Certificate of Education, the International Baccalaureate, or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (Intermediate or Senior).

The project also interviewed 4,500 school non-completers about their post-school pathways. Their results will be published later this year.

The On Track survey found that 72 per cent of last year’s school completers went on to further education or training. This figure is down three per cent on last year.

Of the 2007 class, 44 per cent enrolled in university and 18 per cent enrolled in TAFE. One in ten students deferred tertiary study.

While study at university and TAFE decreased, the proportion of young people taking up apprenticeships and traineeships increased by two percentage points to 10 per cent of school completers.

Fourteen per cent of completers reported being in full-time employment, also an increase on last year. The proportion of school completers looking for work remained steady at three per cent.

The survey highlighted the relationship between school sector and geographical and socioeconomic background on students’ post-school pathways.

On Track found that a greater proportion of private school students (54 per cent) enrol at university compared to government school students (36 per cent).

Almost 20 per cent of government school students entered the workforce after leaving school, compared with just nine per cent of private school students.

Ninety per cent of Year 12 completers who deferred further study reported that they did so to have a year off from study. One-third of students said that the costs of study influenced their decision to defer. Eighteen per cent said that they were waiting to qualify for youth allowance.

The rate of deferral was much higher among school completers from non-metropolitan areas. These results suggest that the financial burden of studying poses a greater problem for students who must leave home to undertake tertiary education than it does for metropolitan students.

Releasing the results, Victorian Education Minister Bronwyn Pike called on the Commonwealth government to rethink student income support as students increasingly report that AUSTUDY and Independent Youth Allowance payments do not adequately cover the costs of living.

The results of the OnTrack survey can be found online at www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/ontrack
The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is one of the world’s leading educational research centres. Its mission is to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services to improve learning across the lifespan.

ACER was established in 1930 and for more than 75 years has built a strong reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policy makers and professional practitioners. As a not-for-profit organisation, independent of government, ACER receives no direct financial support and generates its entire income through contracted research and development projects and through products and services that it develops and distributes. ACER has experienced significant growth in recent years and now has around 250 staff located in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Dubai and New Delhi.

ACER is a leader in the provision of quality educational research, both within Australia and internationally. As a national, independent research body, ACER brings a high level of expertise and objectivity to its work.

In recent times ACER has expanded on its program of research and development in support of learning in vocational education and training and in higher education institutions while maintaining and expanding work undertaken in support of schools.

Blending solid experience and creative talent with established methodologies, ACER is a full-service research consultancy specialising in collecting and interpreting information to shape strategic decision making. Researchers bring many years of experience and expertise in a range of disciplines and research methods to their projects.

ACER has six research programs:

- Research into Transitions and Post-school Education and Training explores influences on the educational and occupational pathways of young people as they progress from school to further education, training and work. Studies investigate the labour market and social outcomes of different pathways as well as evaluations of particular policies and programs.

- The Assessment and Reporting program conducts research into a wide range of educational outcomes (academic and social). This work, undertaken for clients nationally and internationally and in support of ACER's own tests and assessment programs, includes the refinement of test constructs; studies of test validity and reliability; assessment methods and formats; psychometric analyses of test data; and methods for item banking, online test delivery and reporting.

- Research in the National and International Surveys area draws on staff expertise in sampling, survey management, the analysis of survey data and the interpretation and reporting of results in conducting large scale survey research. Current work includes the leadership of three major programs of international surveys including the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment.

- The Systemwide Testing program identifies more effective ways of monitoring achievement across entire education systems.

- Research into Teaching, Learning and Leadership focuses on the relationship between teacher professional development and improved student learning.

The Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation unit explores education policy issues and conducts program evaluation.

In addition to being a national centre for educational policy research and advice, ACER develops and provides a range of research-based products and services to support the work of professional practitioners.

ACER provides secure, fee-for-service testing programs to schools, universities, employers and professional organisations. These programs include selection tests for entry to schools and universities, scholarship tests and tests for diagnostic and monitoring purposes, and recruitment tests.

The organisation also encompasses ACER Press, the Cunningham Library, the Centre for Professional Learning, the International Institute, and the ACER Leadership Centre.