Learning assessment collaboration

Hamish Bennett Coates, ACER
Leading like a candle

Higher education grows through diversification, excellence, innovation and equity. Higher education research and development (R&D) seeks new and better ways to help systems, institutions and individuals learn. ACER collaborates globally in this field, working with experts and stakeholders to generate evidence on how we can build and improve.

It appears that the next five years will bring even more change to higher education than has been experienced in recent decades. New competitive pressures and collaborative opportunities are emerging. Operating contexts are being reformed, creating new epistemological, organisational and collegial settings. The ‘ivory tower’ is already a heavily outdated metaphor; myriad architectural imaginations are proliferating at a hastening pace.

Guiding effective change in this milieu requires sound and timely strategy and evidence. This edition of ACER’s Higher Education Update charts advice and insights generated through recent work.

The briefing explores R&D conducted to plan growth at the system level, looking at student growth projections, the supply of academics and student retention. It reviews new thinking about assessment collaborations and the measurement of interpersonal understanding, a concept core to knowledge work and creation. Student engagement and experience counts, and we showcase key outcomes from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.

Understanding and improving outcomes is at the forefront of emerging policies and practices, and several articles look at ACER’s recent service and innovation in this area. The OECD’s AHELO Feasibility Study, led internationally by ACER, has been launched into the field. We chart contributions to system-level quality assurance and improvement, and preview a study that will track the tertiary achievement of International Baccalaureate (IB) graduates. In an increasingly borderless world, we take stock of evolving innovative international assessment communities in Australia, the Middle East, Asia and North America.

Please visit www.acer.edu.au/highereducation for more information on research developments. We hope you enjoy this briefing. We welcome your feedback and ideas to highereducation@acer.edu.au.

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Planning growth

Growth targets and student numbers

The Federal Government’s higher education targets are likely to be very difficult to achieve unless bachelor degree attainment of 25 to 34 year olds can increase at twice the rate of population growth, according to a research review by ACER Senior Research Fellow, Dr Daniel Edwards.

In the fourth research briefing for the Joining the Dots series, Dr Edwards examines the expansion of Australia’s higher education sector and how this might affect student numbers.

In the paper, ‘Expanding the Sector: Growth targets and student numbers’, Dr Edwards argues that the target of 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds in Australia holding a bachelor degree or above by 2025 could be made more difficult by recent changes to migration policies and the predicted fall in the number of international students studying in Australia.

Recent substantial growth in attainment levels of the 25 to 34 year old cohort has been a result of strong migration and the growth of international students, rather than any domestically driven increase in provision.

‘It is estimated that by 2025 a total of 1.47 million people aged 25 to 34 years old, will need to have at least a bachelor level qualification if the 40 per cent attainment target is to be met,’ Dr Edwards writes.

‘Australia will not reach these numbers through demographic change alone – the number of people with a bachelor degree or above in this age cohort will need to grow at twice the rate of natural population growth over the coming decade and a half.’

Drawing on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Dr Edwards argues that the clear growth in attainment over the past decade cannot be attributed to increased participation of domestic students in higher education. Rather, it is more likely that growth in higher education attainment levels has been the result of a strong skilled migration program, focused on young migrants in professional occupations, alongside large increases in the number of international students studying in Australia.

‘The role of domestic student expansion in Australia in achieving the government’s target of 40 per cent attainment over the long term is of paramount importance,’ Dr Edwards writes.

An examination of research conducted by the Centre for Population and Urban Research (CPUR) and growth estimates from DEEWR indicate that the most serious growth in completion numbers will need to occur in the years between 2015 and 2021, with a required annual growth of five per cent, and that actual numbers of domestic bachelor degree completions will need to increase from 100,000 in 2010 to 180,000 by 2025 – an 80 per cent growth in the sector.

‘While initial growth may be on track, the challenge for the sector will be increasing the rate of growth and sustaining such increases until the beginning of the next decade,’ Dr Edwards argues in the paper.

‘The conclusion is that the estimates by DEEWR appear to follow the numbers in the CPUR scenario up until 2015, but from then onwards, there is a large and unknown gap in the following decade that needs to be filled.’

While it is clear that there is a substantial amount of growth required in the sector over the coming decade and a half, there are still many questions about provision and the practicalities surrounding the sustainability of such growth.

Joining the Dots is a subscription-based resource provided by ACER to those with an interest in Australian Higher Education. The 2011 series included eight Research Briefings, a monthly news and event digest, and a webinar series. More detail can be found at www.acer.edu.au/jtd or by emailing jtd@acer.edu.au
University retention and completion rates have improved

The retention rate for commencing bachelor degree students in Australia has increased from 81 per cent in 2001 to 84 per cent in 2009, while the completion rate has increased from 72 per cent in 2005 to 80 per cent in 2008, according to an ACER Joining the Dots Research Briefing released in November 2011.

The Research Briefing (Volume 1, Number 6, October 2011) also noted that in the next few years new university enrolments are expected to come disproportionately from low socio-economic status (SES) groups that are historically under-represented.

The engagement of low SES groups will be crucial to ensure the Australian Government achieves the target of 40 per cent of all 25 to 34 year olds having a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025.

ACER Senior Research Fellow, Dr Julie McMillan, said currently university students from low SES backgrounds persist in their studies at rates similar to, or slightly lower than, high SES students.

‘As the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds increases, it will be necessary to continue to monitor their retention and completion rates closely. Among those who discontinue their studies, low SES students are more likely than high SES students to cite academic and financial difficulties as a consideration for non-completion of their degrees.’

The briefing examines how students who commence higher education studies progress through their courses. The briefing provides a synthesis of currently available information on student retention, attrition and completions, as well as the reasons underlying course non-completion.

Dr McMillan said Australia’s completion rates are substantially higher than the OECD average of 70 per cent, but substantially lower than the 93 per cent reported by Japan.

‘While the results are positive, and considerably higher than the 2005 figure of 72 per cent for Australia cited by the Bradley Review, there remains scope for improvement,’ Dr McMillan said.

‘For example, the overall rates mask substantial differences between domestic and overseas students, with overseas students consistently displaying higher retention rates and lower attrition rates throughout the last decade. Also, there is considerable variation among institutions, with retention rates for commencing bachelor degree students ranging from 60 per cent to 94 per cent in 2009.’

Dr McMillan said while it was encouraging to see completion rates improve over the last few years with four in five students completing their bachelor degrees, it was important to understand and develop appropriate retention strategies for those who didn’t complete their studies.

The most common reasons students give for discontinuing study relate to interests, health and personal factors, and their course turning out to be not what they wanted. Financial and academic difficulties are less prominent considerations.

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Future academics need encouragement to stay in Australia

The higher education sector must focus on creating roles for early career academics and retaining research graduates or it risks impeding Australia’s ability to meet its university attainment targets, according to an ACER research review.

In the seventh research briefing for the *Joining the Dots* series, ‘Where are the academics of tomorrow? Supply and demand issues for Australian universities’, ACER Senior Research Fellow, Dr Daniel Edwards, explored how the academic workforce is placed to cope with the forecast rise in student numbers that will result if university attainment targets are to be met.

‘A viable and engaged academic workforce is vitally important if the expansion of the higher education system is to be a success,’ said Dr Edwards.

Dr Edwards’ research suggests that, in some fields, the supply of academics will not be great enough to meet demand. Dr Edwards said large numbers of research graduates are building careers outside of the Australian higher education sector, reflecting findings from the 2010 National Research Student Survey (NRSS) that show there is a perception among current research students that positions in universities are not widely available.

It is estimated that there are around 19,000 current research students in Australia under the age of 40 with serious career plans to join the academic profession over the coming decade. However, the NRSS revealed that more than 43 per cent of these research students plan to pursue this profession outside Australia. This reduces the estimated supply of academics to Australian universities to about 11,000.

Recent findings from an Australian survey of academics indicate that 48 per cent of the current academic workforce, or over 50,000 academics, intend to retire, move to an overseas university, or leave Australian higher education at some time in the next ten years, indicating there may be growth in the availability of academic positions in the medium term.

‘Greater emphasis on highlighting the availability of positions is one of the ways the sector can help to ensure there are enough academics to meet future needs,’ said Dr Edwards.

Dr Edwards said the good news is the NRSS found research students have a positive impression of the academic career, rating it more attractive than other careers on a wide range of factors including interest and challenge, flexibility, work/life balance and job satisfaction.

‘No matter how attractive an occupation may be, if a student believes there are no positions available then the chance they will pursue this line of work is likely to be greatly diminished,’ said Dr Edwards.

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Informing tertiary education planning

There is considerable interest in the provision of and access to tertiary education within Australia’s states and territories. In 2009 the Victorian government began developing a Tertiary Education Plan for the state. Released in 2010, the plan detailed various targets and policy objectives in this sector; notably in response to the national 40 per cent bachelor degree attainment target for 25–34 year olds and the national 20 per cent low socioeconomic background enrolment target.

In a report advising on the development of the Victorian Tertiary Education Plan, Expert Panel chair Professor Kwong Lee Dow noted that both of these targets will require greater participation from outer Melbourne and regional Victorian communities if they are to be achieved. A number of more specific Tertiary Education Plans, based on geographic locations within Victoria, are therefore being constructed.

One such plan is being constructed for the Gippsland region in Victoria’s east and south-east. To inform the development of the Gippsland Tertiary Education Plan, in 2011 Skills Victoria commissioned ACER to prepare three separate reports providing supporting analysis of: the region’s industry, employment and population profile; the region’s student profile; and student demand projections for the region.

The first report analysed Gippsland’s industry, employment and population profile, highlighting recent change and projecting further change over the coming years. The employment analysis found that Gippsland has a lower rate of participation in the labour force than Melbourne. In regard to industry, of the eight largest industries in Gippsland, manufacturing is the only one projected not to grow. The demographic analysis identified that the proportion of 20–40 year olds in Gippsland was significantly lower than in Melbourne and Victoria.

The second report provided statistical analysis of the local student profile, examining the numbers of school students and retention rates to year 12, the destinations of year 12 completers and tertiary choices of non-year 12 applicants from Gippsland. It found that school retention rates are significantly lower in Gippsland than in metropolitan regions. Analysis of On Track Victorian school-leaver data found that, compared to other regions in Victoria, school completers in Gippsland are less likely to be studying a bachelor degree and are more likely to be studying at Certificate I–III level, in an apprenticeship, in part-time employment or looking for work. The report also identified that there are large numbers of adult learners within the region.

The third report provides three projections of attendance rates at technical and vocational courses and tertiary courses in the Gippsland region, and focuses on persons aged 18-22. The three projections in this report are all modelled from 2006-2026, as 2006 represents the most recently available Census data. A flat projection assumes that the trends in tertiary attendance in Gippsland will continue into the coming decades, while an optimistic projection assumes that tertiary attendance will rise at a more rapid rate than has been evident in the past decade or so.

The information contained in these reports is being used to help achieve the goals of the Gippsland Tertiary Education Plan—to improve the delivery of tertiary education, improve post-school destinations for students, improve participation in education and training more generally for the community, identify and rectify gaps in delivery, and to prepare the sector for demand driven funding in both higher education and vocational education and training.

The full reports are available from the ACER Research Repository:


Capturing outcomes

AHELO fieldwork goes live

Interesting new questions lie at the core of the OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Feasibility Study, led internationally by ACER: Is it possible to undertake an international assessment of final-year students’ capacity to use, apply and act on the knowledge and reasoning they have gained from their degrees? Is it possible to assess these outcomes in an efficient and internationally comparable way? Can policymakers, institutional leaders, faculty and students be convinced that the assessment of higher education learning outcomes is an essential checkpoint in the educational process?

In previous editions of Higher Education Update, we have reported on preparatory work underway by ACER and partner organisations to create AHELO assessment frameworks and instruments in three testing strands—generic skills, economics and engineering—and context instruments for students, teaching staff and institutions.

From February 2012 preparatory work will be put to the test as fieldwork commences. Up to 40,000 students and 10,000 teaching staff across more than 250 higher education institutions in 16 countries will participate in fieldwork between February and May 2012. Ten institutions will participate in Australia, each testing up to 150 final-year students.

In addition to multiple choice items, all three assessment strands incorporate constructed response tasks which invite students to type an extended response. These responses must be scored by domain experts in each participating country. Ensuring that scoring standards are replicated and monitored across countries is one of the challenges involved in the AHELO Feasibility Study. This calls for the development of detailed scoring rubrics and the intensive training of those responsible for scoring in each country.

In November 2011, ACER’s Hamish Coates, Sarah Richardson and Julian Fraillon led a three-day international training session for national project managers from all countries involved in AHELO’s fieldwork. The lead scorers for each country (mostly university professors) were provided with an introduction to the scoring approach used in AHELO. They also scrutinised the scoring rubrics created by test developers and made suggestions for their revision.

Follow-up international training from ACER and partners is scheduled for March 2012 in Paris. The lead scorers from each country will be provided with rigorous training in the application of scoring rubrics. They will have extensive opportunities to practice scoring genuine student responses under the guidance of test developers. They will be trained in using the AHELO Test System to monitor between-scorer reliability.

After this meeting, lead scorers will return to their countries and train other members of the national scoring teams.

The approach to the training of scorers is indicative of the attention to detail and international cooperation required for all facets of operations in a large cross-national study such as AHELO. Similar approaches have been taken to the training of national project managers in the translation of assessment instruments, the sampling of students and teaching staff and the use of the AHELO Test System. In addition to training, all those involved in AHELO are provided with ongoing support and advice to help them implement AHELO activities in their countries.

Already, much has been learned through AHELO of the capacity to develop assessment definitions and instruments that are valid across languages and cultures. Results from the main testing round will yield new knowledge about higher education students’ learning. Creating strategies for higher education institutions and stakeholders to make good use of this information is the key challenge ahead.

Further information about the AHELO Feasibility Study is available from www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo
Capturing outcomes

Assessing interpersonal understandings

ACER Research Fellows, Mr David Norris and Dr Brad Jackel, are pioneering new approaches to assessing interpersonal understandings.

An individual’s ability to understand interpersonal situations and to reason about human feelings and interactions has become an important consideration in the medical student selection process. There is a growing recognition that medical practitioners require more than academic skills to be good at their jobs. They must be good communicators and ‘people readers’.

‘Interpersonal’ multiple choice questions are designed to assess a candidate’s ability to understand and infer the thoughts, feelings, behaviour, motivations or intentions of the people depicted in text-based scenarios, dialogues and passages. Such multiple choice questions are currently being used across Australia as part of a battery of instruments to differentiate between large numbers of academically qualified candidates applying for limited places in university medical courses.

At ACER, interpersonal questions are developed according to a ‘construct of empathy’, where empathy is regarded as a cognitive ability requiring reasoning about interpersonal situations. As such, interpersonal questions do not aim to test candidates’ knowledge of social conventions or their opinions about human behaviour. Rather they aim to test how much candidates understand about what is happening inside, and between, the people depicted in given scenarios.

The major requirement of all interpersonal stimulus texts is that they are authentic in the sense that they reflect ‘real life’. They must also contain some kind of emotional conflict. Whether this conflict originates from a misunderstanding or tension between people, or from some private suffering, struggle or excitement expressed by an individual, without agitation of some kind—and variation within the expression of that agitation—there would be little scope for asking questions which test an understanding of human emotion and motivation.

The best interpersonal texts are those which open themselves to misinterpretation—not from any linguistic ambiguity, but from complexities arising from expressed human feelings and behaviours that might be counter-intuitive or contradictory, subtle or understated, implied or suggested, unexpected or exaggerated, or even misunderstood by the characters themselves. Ideally, interpersonal stimulus texts are ‘emotionally complex’ as opposed to ‘verbally confusing’. Where correct interpretations are specified, they must be demonstrably true from evidence within the text. Conversely, incorrect answers—though still plausible in the sense of their intelligibility and relatedness—must be misreadings of the given situation and defensibly wrong.

When we ask interpersonal questions we are, at some level, testing knowledge and experience of shared human actions and emotions. We are asking candidates to look inward at their own experiences for confirmation that their interpretations of a particular situation are correct. We are asking them to place themselves into others’ shoes; to imagine others’ minds; to seek an understanding of others’ feelings through the interpretative medium of their own feelings. The measurable part occurs once we ask candidates to take this empathetic knowledge and reason with it in situations separate to their own lives and opinions.
Quality assurance research and its relevance to China

2011年10月23日至24日，由中国高等教育学会和重庆市人民政府联合举办的“质量提升与建设高等教育强国”2011年高等教育国际论坛在重庆召开。教育部党组副书记、副部长杜玉波，教育部原副部长、中国高等教育学会会长周远清等70余位专家出席了会议。来自中国29个省、市、自治区教育行政部门、近300所高校和教研机构的领导、专家学者、博士生代表，以及世界经济合作与发展组织（OECD）、美国、英国、澳大利亚、香港和台湾地区的专家学者，英国驻重庆总领事馆文化教育处官员等共计600余人参加了会议。澳大利亚教育研究委员会（ACER）研究员赵煜博士应论坛组委会邀请参加了本次年会。

在主论坛上，赵煜博士作了题为《澳大利亚高等教育中的质量保障（Quality assurance in the Australian higher education）》报告。报告共分为三个部分：ACER简介，澳大利亚高等教育中的质量保障和ACER在高等教育领域的主要工作与职能。她指出，在全球化社会的今天，科学技术突飞猛进，知识经济迅速发展，国际竞争日趋激烈，文化多元化趋势日益增强，教育面临前所未有的新形势、新问题和新挑战。世界各国无不把教育作为优先发展的战略领域，把教育改革与质量提升作为应对时代挑战和提高国际竞争力的重要举措。在如火如荼的全球性教育改革中，提高质量、促进公平、推动发展，建设教育强国成为许多学者们共同关注的主题。高等教育是实现澳大利亚政府提出的“建立一个更加强大和公平的澳大利亚”远景规划中不可缺少的一部分，它能刺激经济增长，提高生产力水平，在这一进程中，教育质量评估扮演着重要的角色。

赵博士指出，澳大利亚高等教育质量保障正在经历着一个转型阶段，科研排名通常被作为衡量各大学教育质量的重要指标，但是对于大学即将毕业的学生并没有广义的评估，我们更无法比较各大学学生们的基础素质和所学知识，是否能够学以致用，我们也没有对学生在学习期间的教育质量有一个统一的评估手段。

赵博士认为，测评质量被认为是教育质量中的重要元素，测量大学学生学习成就和能力需要有新的质量标准，由OECD发起的高等教育学习成果评估（AHELO）是一个特别有发展前景的保证质量和提升质量的手段，它不仅广泛用于内部评估也可以对大学所提供的质量进行外部监督。AHELO能够发现，在跨国家、跨院校、跨文化、跨语言的情况下学生需要掌握什么，在取得学位前能够做什么，它能尽可能评价一个强有力的外部视角，客观地评价不同国家、地区的高等教育机构及其学生。一个全面的质量评价，被评价国家的高等教育机构、特别是校学生都会从中受益。目前有包括澳大利亚在内的16个国家参加了AHELO项目。

赵博士的报告从理论到现实，从高等教育质量评估的目标、特征、重点、规律到具体的评估实践，都讲得声情并茂，生动精彩，让大家对澳大利亚高等教育质量保障，特别是AHELO项目有了一个更为清晰地认识。

ACER领导实施AHELO这个项目的各国际组织。Hamish Coates副教授是这个国际项目的负责人，Sarah Richardson博士管理项目相关的国际事务。


ACER Research Fellow, Dr Yu Zhao, presenting in Chongqing in October 2011
ACER Higher Education Update February 2012
Capturing outcomes

Tracking IB graduates’ tertiary achievement

The number of schools offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma has grown by more than 55 per cent worldwide over the past five years and the IB is playing an increasing role in preparing people for university study. The IB Diploma is offered by over 2300 schools internationally, including 284 in the Asia-Pacific and 63 in Australia.

A 2007 ACER report by Coates, MacMahon Ball and Rosicka1 found Australian and New Zealand universities had quite informal means of understanding IB graduates’ admission into and progression through university study. The report recommended that greater information be collected on the destinations and outcomes of IB graduates.

The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) has now engaged ACER to investigate the tertiary enrolment, achievement, progression and post-tertiary patterns and pathways of IB Diploma graduates.

The Project Director, ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Daniel Edwards, said the project offers universities, schools and the IBO a new and unique insight into a key post-school pathway. ‘This project builds on the findings from previous research and will culminate in a new data collection providing policy-relevant findings that can be used to improve the understanding of the IB in Australia,’ said Dr Edwards.

The study is focussing on:
- tertiary enrolment to specific Australian universities, including the field of study;
- correlation of IB scores with academic performance at university;
- continuation/progression rate;
- graduation rate;
- post-tertiary pathways; and
- student characteristics.

The research will compare IB students with national averages and with students at selected institutions who have entered university via other pathways. A longitudinal analysis will review data universities collect on progression and student success. A snapshot analysis is looking at the application/enrolment stage and the graduation stage, and will be based on 2007 and 2011 data.

Two Australian universities are participating in the first phase of the study, due for completion in early-mid 2012.

‘The participating universities and the ACER research team working on this project are looking forward to examining the results of this project,’ said Dr Edwards. ‘We hope that this work will help to further our understanding of pathways into, through and out of university from this unique entry method.’

Assessment collaborations

Innovative international assessment communities evolve

The approaches, intentions and passions that have driven scholars to collaborate internationally on research over many years are being increasingly deployed to cultivate international assessment communities. These communities show genuine and substantial potential for improving the assessment of student learning, and for shedding informed light on educational outcomes.

This momentum is timely, for higher education is moving into an era that places far greater emphasis on understanding knowledge and learning, and on using evidence-based insights for monitoring and improvement. This calls for assessment resources that yield valid and reliable data, and that are efficient to implement, analyse and report.

As an independent and internationally-focused agency with a mission to improve learning, ACER is supporting higher education institutions and systems around the world to take collegial leadership in building robust, efficient and relevant assessment resources and materials.

As the agency leading OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Feasibility Study, ACER has the privilege and opportunity of collaborating with hundreds of experts globally on work unfolding in numerous systems and hundreds of institutions. After considerable design and development, many countries are entering the fieldwork phase of the study, supported by interlinked concepts, methods and practices. An international meeting to discuss results is scheduled for December 2012.

With similar intentions to international innovations like AHELO, many countries are building their own national assessment regimes. Work has been underway in the United States for some time. In recent years, the Australian Government has flagged its intentions in this area as part of quality and regulatory reform, as has Saudi Arabia. In April 2012, a Learning Outcomes Symposium will be convened in Ontario, Canada. These policy developments stimulate new perspectives on future higher education. Many countries in Asia are planning next steps.

Diverse institutional and disciplinary innovations are underway in sync with these (inter-)governmental initiatives. In Australia, ACER is collaborating with several medical schools and international experts to design and build a medical assessment collaboration (AMAC). In 2012, ACER is coordinating a series of new Assessment Symposia. The Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates have developed system-wide learning assessments to enhance institutional effectiveness.

By leveraging benefits from collaboration systems, institutions, teachers and students have much to gain from increased collaboration on the assessment of student learning. But there is significant work to be done to set foundations, to discuss and debate options, to engage learners, teachers and leaders, to realise quality enhancements and cost reductions, and to yield evidence that affirms that this work offers better—and likely ‘new’—forms of education and development.

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Assessment collaborations

- AHELO International NPM meeting (Paris, 2011)
- Japanese AHELO Institution Coordinators’ meeting (Tokyo, 2011)
- Saudi Arabian National Centre for Assessment meeting (Riyadh, 2011)
- Australian AHELO Institution Coordinators’ meeting (Melbourne, 2011)
- Mexican AHELO Institution Coordinators’ meeting (Reunión, 2011)
Higher education is moving into an era that places far greater emphasis on measuring student learning outcomes, and on using results for monitoring and continuous improvement. This calls for assessment resources that yield valid and reliable data, and that are efficient to implement, analyse and report.

ACER is broadening its work with higher education teachers and educational leaders by developing structured collaborations that improve the quality and efficiency of assessment. A series of assessment symposia are being convened in 2012 to help university teachers, academic coordinators and institutions develop better quality and more cost effective assessment resources and practices within selected disciplines.

Across two days, the meetings train small groups of up to 20 participants on:

- contexts shaping assessment design;
- assessment development techniques;
- assessment framework development;
- item development, validation and review; and
- analysing and using results.

Each symposium is led by senior ACER assessment developers—international experts in producing assessment materials for high-stakes studies—and external experts drawn from the relevant field. Resulting materials and ideas can be used by academics in lab assignments, examinations, clinical assessments and tests.

Further details will be available soon. Register your interest at highereducation@acer.edu.au
In response to increasing national and state interest in addressing and improving the Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) skills of Australian workers and vocational education and training (VET) participants, ACER will present the inaugural National Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Conference in Melbourne on Friday 4 May 2012.

Designed for managers and coordinators of training and learning in both industry and the VET sector, the conference will highlight local and international research in this area and present practical solutions and expertise from within industry and VET.

Presentations will cover the main topics and research regarding the LLN skills of the Australian adult population from an industry and training perspective, as well as practical issues, such as identifying and assessing LLN skills, and supporting learners and trainees in improving their LLN skills.

Two half-day pre-conference workshops will address the 2011 Australian Core Skills Framework and item writing for adult literacy and numeracy assessments.

For details visit [http://www.acer.edu.au/nallnac](http://www.acer.edu.au/nallnac)
ACER presented a two-day conference on student engagement in November 2011. Around 150 experts and stakeholders from countries including Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Oman and the United States gathered in Melbourne to discuss challenges around student engagement and share strategic insights to further improve the quality of higher education.

Recent national developments such as the advent of TEQSA have brought the intersection of teaching, learning and student engagement to the fore, while ambitious national participation targets and the resulting need for a significant increase in student retention mean that student engagement is more vital than ever.

‘Eight years ago people in the higher education sector would say they are not responsible for student engagement, but we don’t hear that any more,’ ACER Higher Education Research Director, Associate Professor Hamish Coates, told delegates.

Students and the Council of International Students Australia participated in a student panel discussion to provide insight into what students believe are the key elements of a positive student experience of higher education. Some of the suggestions raised included holding student-run events and encouraging students to spend more time on campus by providing high-quality facilities and services as well as recreation opportunities. For postgraduate students, it was suggested that bookable desks replace ‘hot desks’. For international students, it was suggested that the needs of international and domestic students need to be met without segregating one group from the other.

In his presentation on the economics of student engagement, Professor Ross Milbourne, Vice Chancellor of University of Technology, Sydney, said there is a concern that the linking of funding to completions may lead to universities selecting students and courses based on how likely they are to leave before completion. He pointed to evidence that international students and female students are less likely to leave before completion, while indigenous students are more likely to do so.

Professor Milbourne also highlighted the cost to the economy of non-completion. He said that, as the lifetime earnings of a university graduate are around $1.5 million more than a school leaver with no further qualifications, every attrition potentially costs the economy $1.5 million.

Further information, including the full conference program and list of speakers, is available from http://www.improvingstudentengagement.com
Improving engagement

Weaving work into higher education

ACER last year released a major report funded by Ako Aotearoa on the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) titled Student Engagement in New Zealand’s Universities. The report conceptualises diverse facets of student engagement and recommends strategies for improvement.

Report editor and ACER Research Fellow, Ms Ali Radloff, said that understanding and improving New Zealand students’ completion rates requires identifying the aspects of students’ experience at university that are intrinsic to their success. AUSSE shows that students with strong engagement in work-integrated forms of learning display lower departure intentions.

In New Zealand universities, there is room for improvement in this area. By the later years of study, around 22 per cent of New Zealand students have participated in an industry placement or work experience. New Zealand students are engaged less than their Australian counterparts with experiences that can build job-related or work-related knowledge and skills.

Analysis by Trudy Harris and Richard Coll from the University of Waikato examined career readiness in depth, reporting a marked relationship between departure intentions and the extent to which students feel that their experience has helped them gain job-related or work-related knowledge and skills. More than 44 per cent of students who say that their experience at university has contributed only ‘very little’ to their development of work-related knowledge and skills have seriously considered leaving their current institution before graduation. In contrast, the prevalence of departure intentions drops to around 20 per cent for students who say university contributed ‘very much’ to the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills.

Harris and Coll suggest that improving students’ acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills may help mitigate students’ departure intentions. They believe this could be addressed by encouraging students to seek careers counselling or careers advice, and also by incorporating more work-integrated forms of learning, such as participation in work experience or internships, into curricula.

The report also examined the engagement of Māori and Pasifika students, international students, differences between male and female students, full-time and part-time students, campus-based and extramural students, and between students by field of study, and the relationship between study and work.

The full report is available from http://www.acer.edu.au/research/ausse/reports

Australian Council for Educational Research

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is one of the world’s leading educational research agencies. 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 80 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 which is 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 more than 300 staff located in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Dubai and New Delhi.

ACER’s extensive research capacity is distributed across nine research programs:

**Higher Education** focuses on admissions and outcomes testing, large-scale surveying, student engagement, research training and teaching quality, demographic modelling and planning, workforce and leadership capability assessment, designing quality assurance systems, analysis and reporting of complex data, and policy analysis and review.

**Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation** undertakes analysis of policies and practices for both government and non-government organisations to help them identify need, collect data, monitor programs, and measure the impact of their policies and practices in relation to their objectives.

**International Surveys** conducts sampling, survey management, scaling methodology, survey data analysis and the interpretation and reporting of results from large-scale international comparative studies.

**National Surveys** conducts a number of large-scale surveys of nationally-representative samples of students that involves expertise in sampling, survey design and implementation, data analysis and reporting of results with a national focus to a variety of audiences.

**Systemwide Testing** identifies more effective ways of monitoring achievement across entire education systems.

**Assessment and Reporting: Humanities and Social Sciences** focuses on cross-curricular skills such as literacy, critical thinking, interpersonal development and verbal reasoning, and on subject-based disciplines such as English and Studies of Society and Environment.

**Assessment and Reporting: Mathematics and Science** focuses on cross-curricular skills such as numeracy and abstract, scientific and quantitative reasoning as well as mathematics and science subject-based disciplines.

**Teaching, Learning and Transitions** focuses on the relationship between teacher professional development and improved student learning, and on the interconnections between education and training, the labour market, and the wider society.

**Psychometrics and Methodology** provides high quality psychometric and data analytic support to projects, manages externally commissioned data analysis/methodology projects and undertakes, publishes and presents research on psychometric and other quantitative research issues.

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.

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