

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian students perform well in science, but many below OECD baseline

A global study involving more than 400,000 15-year-olds in 57 countries provides the latest report card on Australia's progress in providing a world-class education system.

Newly released results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 show that, while the scientific literacy levels of Australian 15-year-olds are significantly above the OECD average, and either similar to or higher than most of our trading partners, many students in this country continue to struggle.

The average performance of Australian students in scientific literacy was significantly below the average of only three other countries – Finland, Hong Kong-China and Canada – with Australia achieving similar results to students in countries such as Japan and Korea.

However, 13% of Australian 15-year-olds fell below a scientific literacy 'baseline' set by the OECD. While this is clearly of some concern, it is below the OECD average of 19% and similar to the proportion in other similar countries such as New Zealand and Canada. Students performing below this level globally are considered by the OECD to be at serious risk of not being adequately prepared to participate in the 21st century workforce or to contribute as productive future citizens.

Of particular concern is the fact that in scientific literacy, 40% of Australia's Indigenous students, 27% of students in our remote schools and 23% of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile in Australia performed below the OECD baseline.

Commenting on the Australian results, Professor Geoff Masters, CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), said that, while Australia's overall performance was very pleasing, there were clearly areas of concern.

"The challenge we face is to ensure that every Australian student has access to high quality teaching and high quality resources, regardless of their background or the school they attend. The task is to ensure that every child has access to, and benefits from, best educational practice".

Australia's result in mathematical literacy also was well above the OECD average. There was no significant decline in Australian students' overall mathematical literacy performances between 2003 and 2006, although there was a significant decline in the average performances of Australian girls during this time.

In 2006, eight countries significantly outperformed Australia in mathematical literacy, compared with seven in 2003. In reading literacy, Australia's average performance declined between 2003 and 2006, primarily because of a decline in our percentage of high performing students.

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In 2006, Australia was significantly outperformed by five countries: Korea, Finland, Hong-Kong China, Canada and New Zealand. In 2000, only Finland outscored Australia. Average performance levels in some countries, including Korea and Hong Kong-China, increased over this period.

PISA assesses the reading, mathematical and scientific literacy skills of 15-year-olds every three years. The main focus of the assessment is different on each occasion: 2000 (Reading Literacy), 2003 (Mathematical Literacy), 2006 (Scientific Literacy).

In Australia, 356 schools and 14,170 students participated in PISA. The testing occurred during a six-week period from late July to early September in 2006.

The international report *Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World* was released by the OECD in Paris this evening Australian time and is available from www.oecd.org.

The Australian report *Exploring Scientific Literacy: How Australia measures up* (Sue Thomson and Lisa De Bortoli) is available from www.acer.edu.au/pisanews

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Media enquiries:

Louise Reynolds

Corporate Publicity and Communications Manager

Phone: (03) 9277 5582

Mobile: 0419 340 058

Email: reynolds@acer.edu.au