

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED Tuesday 27 November 2018

Australian students more anxious about school work

27 November 2018: Australian students reported higher levels of schoolwork-related anxiety than the OECD average, with 65 per cent of Australian students worrying they will get poor grades at school, according to a report released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The report uses data from the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which surveyed 15-year-olds about their schoolwork-related anxiety, and earlier PISA surveys, which looked more closely at anxiety about maths.

Students reported the highest levels of schoolwork-related anxiety in the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia, compared to other states and territories.

In all participating countries, including Australia, females reported higher anxiety related to their school work than males.

Indigenous students, those from the lowest socioeconomic quartile and students not born in Australia reported higher levels of schoolwork-related anxiety.

Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement to five statements.

- I get nervous when I do not know how to solve a task at school (60% of Australian students agreed)
- I get very tense when I study for a test (47%)
- I feel very anxious even if I am well prepared for a test (68%)
- I worry I will get poor grades at school (65%)
- I often worry that it will be difficult for me to take a test (62%).

The highest levels of schoolwork-related anxiety were reported in Singapore, and the lowest levels in Finland, both academically high-performing countries.

ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr Sue Thomson said, “A recent report in the same series showed Finland and Estonia recording low levels of achievement motivation, suggesting an interesting pattern for these countries – high performance associated with lower anxiety and attitudes that focus less on comparison and competition between students.”

Other high-performing countries scored higher than the OECD average on the schoolwork-related anxiety index – Japan, Hong Kong (China), Macao (China), Singapore and Canada.

“Overall, PISA results show that countries where students are highly motivated to achieve also tend to be the countries in which many students feel anxious about their schoolwork,” Dr Thomson said. “Students need to find a balance between striving for success and placing unnecessary and potentially harmful pressure on themselves.

“Performance is optimal where pressure is neither too low, where no one really cares how anyone does, nor too high, where deadlines are too tight and a sense of panic can set in.”

Mathematics anxiety

Mathematics anxiety was surveyed as a specific focus area in 2003 and 2012. Most countries reported increased agreement with statements demonstrating maths anxiety over this period, with the greatest increases in Australia, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand. However, Japan and Hong Kong (China) recorded decreased agreement with statements demonstrating maths anxiety.

In 2012, in response to the statement *I get very tense when I have to do mathematics homework*, 67 per cent of Australian female students agreed and 52 per cent of males agreed.

“The differences between males’ and females’ levels of anxiety were large, especially in relation to maths anxiety, in every participating country,” Dr Thomson said. “Female participation in science, technology, engineering and maths is a challenge for most countries, so low levels of self-confidence in these areas among female students needs to be addressed.”

Mathematics anxiety levels remain higher among Indigenous students, on average, than among non-Indigenous students. Students in the lowest quartile of socioeconomic background reported higher levels of mathematics anxiety than students from the highest socioeconomic background.

The report analyses data produced by the PISA survey, a large-scale three-yearly study of the reading, science and mathematics literacy of more than half a million 15-year-olds in 72 countries, including 14 500 students in 750 Australian schools. The schoolwork-related anxiety data were collected in 2015, and the mathematics anxiety data collected in 2003 and 2012. PISA is managed in Australia by ACER.

Read the full report, *PISA Australia in Focus Number 4: Anxiety*, published by ACER, at <https://research.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/33/>

*****ENDS*****

Media enquiries: Julia Robinson, 03 9277 5582 or 0419 340 058 communications@acer.org
Dr Sue Thomson will be available for interview on Monday 26 November.