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## A clearer picture : national and international testing in the UAE

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# A clearer picture

## National and international testing in the UAE

A national assessment program developed by ACER is helping to improve teaching and learning in the UAE school system. **Alan Egbert** explains.

The Ministry of Education of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has recently introduced the UAE National Assessment Program (UAENAP), developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in partnership with the ministry, to monitor student achievement and progress, in order to inform policy and curriculum development for the nation.

ACER developed and is administering the assessment program to address the specific educational goals identified by the UAE's Education 2020 policy.

UAENAP aims to investigate the progress of students against the standards defined in the national curriculum and to gather data to inform decisions about the allocation of resources, curriculum development

and teacher development to improve the learning outcomes of UAE students.

The results of the assessment program are providing the ministry with evidence about how the system is performing in meeting its Education 2020 goals, and will contribute to enhancing teaching methodologies to ensure that students are well prepared



to meet the challenges of living and working in a global economy.

The program includes tests in the core subject areas of Arabic, English, mathematics and science.

Under UAENAP, reports are provided to all levels of the educational community. At the highest level, the Minister and the ministry receive an overview of the performance of students across all the participating Emirates, including information about strengths and weaknesses in their current learning. This information

can be used to inform policy and curriculum development for the nation.

At each level of the education system there are reports to assist educators in improving student learning, with reports to education zone directors, the principal of every school and each classroom teacher about the performance of students in their care.

Parents also receive a report that shows their child's results in each subject, addressing both their success in terms of individual knowledge and skills, and an overall indication of their

standard in the subject. The standards statements indicate to parents the types of skills that students need to acquire in order to improve their learning outcomes.

More than 40,000 students from 285 schools participated in the November 2010 assessment, which tested all students in Grades 3, 5, 7 and 9 in the Emirates of Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimeh, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain.

Results from the November 2010 UAENAP revealed considerable

The UAENAP results show that there is room for improvement in the areas of writing and spelling, both in Arabic and English and especially for boys.

variation in the performance of students. Results show students' reading skills in Arabic and English overall are higher than expected, while their performance in science and maths is at expected levels, but their performance in writing and spelling in Arabic and English is lower than expected.

On average the mean performance of girls is better than the mean performance of boys, but boys are well represented in the top-performing students. The UAENAP results show that there is room for improvement in the areas of writing and spelling, both in Arabic and English and especially for boys.

The results also provide a clearer picture of the national state of education, by establishing a set of averages for schools, Emirates and the country. Teachers will be trained to use the test results to measure progress and develop personalised learning approaches for students. Schools and zones will be able to use the data to

see how schools perform, and improve in performance, relative to other schools.

According to UAE Minister of Education Humaid Mohammad Obaid Al Qutami, speaking to *Gulf News* reporter Rayeesa Absal in May, 2011, 'The findings of the assessment will be used to overhaul the curriculum.

'The assessment will help the ministry get a clear picture of the quality of education offered in these schools. It will also allow the officials and policy makers to study the strengths and weaknesses of educational zones, schools and individual pupils,' the Minister said.

The UAENAP tests have been developed to assess students on their thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills. They not only show students and their teachers, parents and other stakeholders how students have fared but also identify expected levels of educational attainment. This will help students and their teachers



and others tremendously in goal setting for improvement.

Results from the 2010 UAENAP point to some long-term and short-term recommendations that need to be implemented, the most immediate being to modify the curriculum and to focus on writing activities in schools.

ACER has conducted a series of workshops with education zones and schools to enable education zone heads, supervisors and teachers to interpret data from the 2010 UAENAP and create student-specific courses.

Ghassan Jarara, the English Supervisor of the Sharjah Education Zone, said the tests were necessary to judge the level of achievement of students and schools. 'According to the results, we can put together remedial courses and follow-ups to improve the outcome of the students,' he said. Some of the previous tests conducted by the ministry showed some schools to be performing below the benchmark, he added. 'With more training on analysing the results, schools should be able to work on their shortcomings,' he said.

While the national results this year indicate a good overall performance, results from the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate Dubai public school pupils are achieving below the international average in the key subjects.

Ayesha al Marri, Director of Assessment in the Ministry of Education, told Abu Dhabi-based newspaper the *National* in May 2011 that PISA provides a comparative international measure of curriculum standards.

Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA)

contracted ACER to implement PISA in 2008. As KHDA Director General Dr Abdulla Al Karam told the *National's* Afshan Ahmed in December 2010, Dubai's low 2009 PISA results reflect the standard of education in public schools across the UAE.

Measures in the UAE's Education 2020 policy include:

- curriculum reform
- the development of practical and real-life knowledge and skills in curriculum resources
- increasing the use of information and communication technology in the curriculum
- the restructuring of kindergarten, primary education and secondary education
- developing a recruitment system for educational staff in public and private schools
- developing performance evaluation tools for educational institutions linked to individualised training plans for educational staff
- introducing incentive systems linked to performance
- introducing registration
- developing and implementing a program to develop school leaders, and
- tracking improvements in student outcomes.

Parents received a detailed report of their child's UAENAP performance in April 2011 so they could begin working with teachers to address any identified problems and improve student outcomes.

Mahmoud Mohammed, a parent of Grade 5 pupil Majed at a public school in Ajman, said information from assessment programs that are skill-based and not restricted to questions in the textbook provide a better picture of his son's progress.

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