

January 2012

Partner focus : good neighbours

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Recommended Citation

Ismail, Leila (2012) "Partner focus : good neighbours," *International Developments*: Vol. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://research.acer.edu.au/intdev/vol2/iss2/3>

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Partner focus

Good neighbours

Researchers at ACER are ensuring Australia's international aid program in support of quality education is as smart as it can be, through its work with AusAID. **Leila Ismail** reports.

Ensuring access to quality education is one of the main priorities of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). It's also one of the fundamental aims of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). It makes sense, then, for ACER to provide rapid and reliable responses to requests for research and advisory support from staff in AusAID's overseas posts, as well as research and advice to support AusAID's strategic and policy priorities.

That's exactly what's happening through AusAID's Education Resource Facility (ERF), maintained through a consortium managed by GRM International, with partners ACER and CfBT Education Trust.

The ERF provides AusAID staff with access to the large pool of ACER's highly qualified education experts, drawing on the research power of ACER's Cunningham Library. In essence, it enables AusAID to obtain the best expertise appropriate to the task at hand, even at a moment's notice. ACER's partnership in the ERF owes much to the work of Dita Nugroho, a Research Fellow in ACER's Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation Division, who laid the foundations on which ACER's growing contribution is now built.

ACER's research for the ERF ranges from desk-based literature reviews to field work audits, addressing everything from learning needs to the resource capacity of educational providers in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the South Pacific and beyond. Some research-based analysis and advice is required in a matter of hours, while more long-term research for strategic and policy purposes is delivered over months.

ACER's longer-term work includes research commissioned by the Review of the Papua New Guinea University System to inform the PNG-Australia Partnership for Development strategy to strengthen higher education in PNG. Daniel Edwards, a Senior Research Fellow in the Higher Education Division based in Melbourne, has played a key role in undertaking that research. His colleague in the Higher Education Division, Sarah Richardson, is leading a study on the impact of AusAID higher education scholarship recipients on their return to their home country.

ACER has undertaken work investigating the provision of technical and vocational education and training in the South Pacific region, and we're undertaking ongoing work with the Secretariat of

the Pacific Board of Educational Assessment in Fiji and also more generally for AusAID's Pacific-wide programs. Sydney-based Chris Freeman, Research Director of the Systemwide Testing Division, and Perth-based Jocelyn Cook, a Principal Research Fellow in the Assessment and Reporting Division, are providing ongoing advice to the Secretariat of the Pacific Board of Educational Assessment.

Jocelyn Cook has also undertaken a capacity building consultancy in Nepal. Melbourne-based Justin Brown, a Senior Research Fellow in the Teaching, Learning and Transitions Division, has recently completed research work looking at the provision of technical and vocational education and training in the South Pacific.

David Slattery, a Senior Research Fellow in the Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation Division, Margaret McGregor, a Research Fellow in the

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Assessment and Reporting Division, Marion Meiers, a Senior Research Fellow in the Teaching, Learning and Transitions Division, and others undertake literature reviews.

John Ainley, a Principal Research Fellow in the Educational Monitoring and Research Division, and Phillip McKenzie, Research Director of the Teaching, Learning and Transitions Division, have also contributed to a series of ERF 'Current Issues in Education' papers.

In support of AusAID's strategic and policy priorities, ACER hosted an education roundtable in 2010, which brought together senior AusAID staff and leaders from the key non-government organisations (NGOs) in the aid sector to identify areas where Australian expertise can contribute to education in developing countries, and explore ways to use and grow that expertise.

The goals of Australia's international aid program for education are to enhance access and equity by contributing to global efforts to get the remaining 72 million out-of-school children into primary school; improve teaching quality, infrastructure, curricula, teaching and learning materials, and information management systems; and improve the transition from primary to secondary to post-secondary education. ACER's work with AusAID is helping to deliver on those goals.

The work for the ERF increases ACER's research capacity because it provides international development experience for ACER staff and the organisation as a whole, and promotes cross-divisional collaboration. It also leads to stronger links with AusAID staff, including those at overseas posts, and contributes to AusAID's strategic direction. By providing expert consultancy on educational best practice, we're able to help AusAID to design and deliver effective international aid programs, and that's a good thing.

Leila Ismail is the Education Resource Facility Project Director at the Australian Council for Educational Research.

Australia's international aid effort: Key results

According to the 2011–12 Commonwealth government budget, Australia's international aid priorities are education, health and economic growth, in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Afghanistan and Vietnam.

Key results from Australia's major education programs of assistance in 2008–09 include:

- In Indonesia, the construction of more than 2,000 schools to lift the enrolment of children in the poorest 20 per cent of households.
- In the Philippines, improved access to education supported by training for more than 13,500 primary school teachers and more than 900 teacher trainers and supervisors in Mindanao to provide education for more than 50,000 Muslim students and more than 5,000 indigenous students.
- In PNG, the construction of more than 100 school buildings with another 135 in 2010; in-service training for 33,000 teachers; and leadership and school management training for 400 community women.
- In the Pacific, the Australia-Pacific Technical College graduation of 949 students with internationally recognised technical and vocational qualifications, with a further 1,407 students enrolled on campuses in Fiji, PNG, Samoa and Vanuatu.
- In Bangladesh, the training of more than 3,000 teachers; opening of 3,000 new primary and pre-primary schools and assistance to help 42,000 children complete the pre-primary course.

