Making a difference in developing countries

The work of ACER in education is making the difference in educational outcomes for students across the world, particularly in developing countries, as **Peter McGuckian** explains.

Peter McGuckian is the Director of International Development at the Australian Council for Educational Research.

ACER has worked internationally for more than 15 years, focusing initially on international assessments, particularly the Programme for International Student Assessment of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and increasingly on other aspects of international education. ACER's growing contribution in the area of international education includes policy analysis and program evaluation; research into teaching and learning; and research and evaluation addressing technical and vocational education and training, and higher education.

Through this work, as well as through the establishment of offices in India and the United Arab Emirates, ACER has world-class expertise in understanding the particular education challenges faced by developing countries, and is contributing to a body of evidence-based knowledge on education and development.

In order to better coordinate ACER's growing range of education and development activities, and apply the organisation's decades of education expertise to the context of education in developing countries more strategically, ACER has developed a specific research agenda around education and development, with the principle aim of making a contribution to the improvement of educational

experiences and outcomes for all children and young people, including the most disadvantaged.

Research in the field of education and development addresses specialist topics and issues of particular relevance to the context of education in developing countries such as poverty and education, inclusive education (in order to better address social inequities such as those based on gender, ethnicity, disability, religion and access to resources), out-of-school children, mother-tongue education and education in conflict environments.

Education and development initiatives aim to build sustainable capacity in education in developing countries by working in partnership with governments and development organisations to design and implement contextually relevant policies and programs to increase education access, quality, inclusiveness and achievement for all learners. The aim of research in this field is the development of an evidence base to inform effective educational policies and practices in less developed countries.

Over the past five years, ACER has undertaken education and development projects for AusAID, the World Bank, UNESCO, the Asian Development Bank and UNICEF in countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Tajikistan, Ethiopia and Indonesia, as well as Samoa, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga and Fiji. Underlying this work is ACER's mission to create and promote knowledge and tools that can be used to improve learning across the lifespan, and the belief in the importance of ongoing, lifelong learning both for the fulfilment of individuals and for the wellbeing of society.

At ACER, current and recent projects that are representative of education and development research include evaluations, policy analysis, assessment and research. Such projects include:

- the AusAID Education Resource Facility, where ACER is one of three members of a consortium to provide research, analytical and advisory support to AusAID staff members working in and with education and development
- the UNICEF State of the Art Review and Case Studies to Address Social Norms and Equity in Education, which draws upon a variety of disciplinary approaches to examine the interplay between social norms and student equity, with case studies undertaken in Nepal, Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia

- the Systematic Review of the Impact of Large-Scale Assessments on Education Policy and Practice in Developing Countries, which was part of a competitive global call for proposals by AusAID, Britain's Department for International Development and 3ie, builds upon ACER expertise in large-scale assessments to examine the relevance and role of such programs in education and development policy making, programming and practice
- East Asia Summit Educational Cooperation Taskforce support, where ACER provided support to identify and formulate areas of potential cooperation between 18 countries, taking account of the economic, political and social context of each country and the region as a whole
- the UNICEF Zimbabwe Early Learning Assessment Program to support and enhance national capacity within Zimbabwe to review, reform and reorientate the current system of student assessment, and evaluate the impact of UNICEF's Education Transition Fund program on children, their caregivers, schools and the education sector in general, and
- the South Africa Workbooks Evaluation to support the South African Department of Basic Education's project to provide 'lesson-a-day' learning materials in all 11 official languages for approximately six million children from Reception to Grade 9.

This issue of *International Developments* highlights specific projects addressing ongoing work with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It also focuses on Africa as a region in which education and development initiatives are being implemented, and outlining current and planned contributions to this important field.