



Partner focus

UNICEF and UNESCO

ACER has been working with the United Nations through UNICEF and UNESCO to support high-quality education across the world. **Richa Jain** reports.



Richa Jain is Manager of International Development at the Australian Council for Educational Research

ACER has been working with United Nations organisations on multiple projects.

Projects with UNICEF

UNICEF and ACER work to evaluate education interventions in Africa

In Africa, ACER is working with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on a number of programs to monitor the equity, access and quality of education provision as African states increase primary school enrolment rates in line with the Millennium Development Goals regarding universal education and gender equality in education. UNICEF has engaged ACER to provide expertise on a number of projects that are improving learning in the African region. (See 'Regional focus: Africa,' page 10 in this issue of *International Developments* for more.)

UNICEF and ACER workbooks and textbooks project

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education, with support from UNICEF, commissioned ACER in 2012 to undertake an independent formative evaluation of a South African Department of Basic Education workbooks and

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textbooks project. The project provides ‘lesson-a-day’ learning materials in South Africa’s 11 official languages for approximately six million children from Grade R to Grade 9, as well as the provision of textbooks addressing language and literacy skills in Grades 10 to 12.

ACER’s formative evaluation was led by Dr Rachel Outhred and Dr Adrian Beavis. The formative evaluation and recommendations aim to inform further development of the workbooks and textbooks project. ACER’s final report included recommendations for adjustments to the workbook intervention for future editions.

UNICEF and ACER work to evaluate the Education Transition Fund Program in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, Dr Rachel Outhred, Professor Gabrielle Matters and Dr Adrian Beavis from ACER are working with UNICEF to evaluate the impact of the Education Transition Fund (ETF) program and with the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZimSEC) to establish and implement the UNICEF-funded Zimbabwe Early Learning Assessment program.

The Early Learning Assessment program seeks to evaluate the impact of the multi-donor sector-wide Education Transition Fund Program, totalling a \$180 million dollar investment in Zimbabwe’s education sector.

UNICEF and ACER work on social norms in Nepal, Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia

In 2012, UNICEF engaged ACER to examine the interplay between social norms – the values, beliefs and attitudes that govern behaviours – and student equity. The review and case study investigations by Dr Rachel Outhred in Nepal, Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia looked at how social norms can reinforce exclusion and disparities but can also enable inclusion and equity.

The study identifies effective UNICEF programs that are perceived to effectively address norms affecting education outcomes, and recommends strategies to encourage social norms that promote inclusion in education.

Dr Rachel Outhred and Leila Ismail presented the initial findings of the study at UNICEF’s headquarters in New York in late 2012. Final recommendations and a proposed program strategy are currently being formulated by the research team and will inform UNICEF’s policies and frameworks to help eliminate disparity in education and support marginalised groups who endure multiple social and educational inequalities.

Projects with UNESCO

UNESCO and ACER work on the UIS Observatory of Learning Outcomes

With the support of ACER’s International Development team, Dr John Cresswell, Deputy Research Director of International Surveys in the Educational Monitoring and Research Division, has been involved in a pilot study in 24 countries for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS).

‘Following our evaluation report to the UIS on the pilot study, the UIS Observatory of Learning Outcomes program is now being rolled out across 200 countries for 2013,’ Dr Cresswell explains.

‘The UIS Observatory of Learning Outcomes is in some ways like an audit of assessment practices that enables nations to see how their assessment systems compare,’ Dr Cresswell explains.

‘It’s important to note that this is not about drawing specific comparisons, nor about providing comparable data about student achievement, but about providing detail on the types of national and international assessments that are conducted in various nations, the student cohorts that are involved,

the focus of these assessments in terms of reading, say, or mathematics, the languages used in assessments, the purposes of such assessments and so on.

‘The comprehensive detail generated through the UIS Observatory of Learning Outcomes can then inform the thinking of policy makers at the national and international levels. UNESCO is interested in stimulating policy debate about the most effective kinds of assessment, and using assessment at the national, regional and international levels to drive educational improvement.’

The project supports the goals of the Global Partnership for Education (previously *Education for All*) to provide access to basic education for all, but also to improve the quality of education.

‘Without a clear understanding of school assessment at the national, regional and international levels, you’re not able to draw any meaningful conclusions about the current quality of your educational provision, nor are you able to make informed decisions about what you’re doing well and what you want to improve,’ Dr Cresswell says.

‘We’ve done a great deal of work on the UIS Observatory of Learning Outcomes that is helping policy makers, and us, to formulate the sorts of assessments that support high-quality education across the world.’

UNESCO and ACER work on a learning assessment framework in the Arab States

Dr Cresswell is also leading an ACER and UNESCO Beirut collaboration to develop a common regional learning assessment framework to be used as a benchmark for measuring educational quality in the Arab States.

The collaboration on educational research in the Arab States supports UNESCO’s *Education for All* program in terms of educational policy development in the region.

The ACER and UNESCO Beirut initiative is supporting the development of educational assessment and evaluation programs for the Arab States. ACER and UNESCO Beirut are facilitating training workshops to build national capacity for the programs’ implementation.

The common regional learning assessment framework to be used as a benchmark for measuring educational quality in the Arab States outlines the context and defines terms for a common regional educational improvement initiative, proposes a management structure, identifies appropriate measures, and develops a model for calculating these measures and interpreting results.

‘The Arab States are heavily engaged in national and international assessments but until now little work has been done on translating data into information, policy and practice,’ Dr Cresswell says.

‘The program is therefore focusing on building capacity within the Arab States to analyse, interpret and make good use of existing assessment results, before embarking on more assessment.’

UNESCO and ACER work on using assessment to improve learning in South America

Dr Mike Timms addressed ACER’s work on using assessment to improve learning in South America at the ‘Quality and Equity in Education: International seminar on learning assessment’ in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November 2012. Co-sponsored by Rio’s Municipal Secretariat of Education and UNESCO, the international meeting addressed theoretical and methodological advances, and challenges of educational assessment systems; how schools and education systems use student assessment to improve education; and alternative models to assess the quality of education.

Dr Timms, Director of Assessment and Psychometric Research at ACER, addressed the uses of student assessment to improve learning in his presentation on ‘Using Progress Maps to Improve Teaching and Learning: The Australian experience.’ The roundtable session included a presentation from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile addressing how ACER has assisted them in implementing progress maps in Chile.

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