

# The big picture

## The impact of assessments on education policy

ACER's analysis of the impact of large-scale assessments on education policy in the Asia-Pacific region aims to help stakeholders improve the design and usefulness of assessments.

A new report from ACER through its Centre for Global Education Monitoring and the Network on Education Quality Monitoring in the Asia-Pacific through UNESCO Bangkok aims to understand how assessments like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Programme for International Student Assessment inform system-level decision making.

*Using large-scale assessments of students' learning to inform education policy: Insights from the Asia-Pacific region*, by Mollie Tobin, Petra Lietz, Dita Nugroho, Ramya Vivekanandan and Tserennadmid Nyamkhuu, identifies the characteristics of assessments that most influence education policies.

Assessments that have an impact on education policy are more frequently:

- national rather than international;
- focused on secondary rather than primary school students; and

- sample based rather than census based.

### System monitoring and evaluation

While large-scale assessments of students' learning are often used for a variety of purposes, the report has found that assessment programs that are linked to policy in the Asia-Pacific region are typically used to ensure the quality of education systems, essentially as diagnoses of system strengths and weaknesses over time. After quality, most large-scale assessments are intended to ensure the equity of education systems for subgroups, and accountability of education systems in improving students' learning outcomes.

The study found that national assessments are most frequently used by policymakers to monitor and evaluate education policies, with implementation in terms of curricular and other programmatic reforms the next most frequent use.

Not surprisingly, large-scale international assessments are also often used by policymakers to evaluate the quality of national education systems through the comparison of students' learning relative to other nations, but also to inform agenda setting, and identify policy options and strategies.

### Impact on education policy

More surprisingly, the review found that some large-scale assessments have little to no impact on education policy or decision-making in Asia-Pacific countries, even where education systems conduct national assessments or participate in international assessments.

Typical barriers to the use of assessment data in the development of education policy include:

- perceived low technical quality of the assessment program;



- lack of in-depth and policy-relevant analyses to identify and diagnose issues;
- poor timing of the assessment program and non-integration of the assessment into policy processes;
- inappropriately tailored dissemination to stakeholders; and
- lack of dissemination to the public.

Where large-scale assessments do influence policy, they most frequently influence system-level policies, followed by resource allocation policies. They least frequently affect policies that have a direct impact on teaching and learning practices at the school and classroom level.

Assessments are more likely to have an impact on education policy when they are integrated into policy processes by legislation, are long-term and well-funded, and are the subject of media attention, although hypercritical media attention in some instances can trigger

poor policy making with unintended consequences.

#### Next steps

The report includes a variety of recommendations to improve the integration of assessments in education policy processes.

- Mandate assessment programs and the agencies that manage them through legislation and funding.
- Design assessment programs to collect information relevant to identified policy concerns.
- Design assessment programs to collect information about student outcomes in relation to socioeconomic background, school and home resources and the like.
- Build relations between officials responsible for conducting assessments and policymakers to facilitate communication and understanding of results.

- Report assessment results in ways specifically targeted to policymakers that address relevant policy issues. ■

#### More information

*Using large-scale assessments of students' learning to inform education policy: Insights from the Asia-Pacific region*, by Mollie Tobin, Petra Lietz, Dita Nugroho, Ramya Vivekanandan and Tserennadmid Nyamkhuu, is co-published by ACER's Centre for Education Policy and Practice and Centre for Global Education Monitoring.

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