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Our goal is to support every learner, every learning professional, every learning institution and our learning society through our work.

ACER has built a strong reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policymakers and professional practitioners since it was established in 1930.

As a not-for-profit organisation, independent of government, ACER receives no direct financial support and generates its entire income through contracted research and development projects, and through products and services that it develops and distributes.

ACER has experienced significant growth in recent years and now has more than 400 staff located in offices in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Dubai, Jakarta, London and New Delhi who are working on education projects across the world.

ACER provides research and assessment services, consultancy, support and professional development programs to governments and educational organisations in numerous countries. In addition, ACER develops, implements and evaluates regional, national and international assessment programs for a broad range of international clients. ACER has been engaged in significant collaborative work with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as the leading partner in a consortium responsible for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

ACER has official partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). ACER collaborates with UNESCO through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the UNESCO Office in Bangkok on a variety of initiatives, including the development of empirically supported learning assessments for reading and mathematics, and associated tools and methodologies, that countries can use to effectively and appropriately monitor learning outcomes to inform educational policy.

ACER also collaborates on a number of international development projects with organisations such as UNICEF, the World Bank, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the United Kingdom Department for International Development, contributing to educational evaluation and reform in a number of countries.

Further, ACER is the International Study Centre responsible for the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study and International Computer and Information Literacy Study, and jointly conducts the IEA Teacher Education Development Study with Michigan State University.

ACER through its Centre for Global Education Monitoring (GEM) is tracking progress in the provision and quality of schooling through the systematic and strategic collection of data on educational outcomes, and factors that influence these. GEM aims to support improved policies, programs and practices in education and, ultimately, improved educational progress for all learners.

ACER through its education and development program also supports Ministries of Education within the development sector to improve student learning. ACER’s education and development research program focuses on conducting and supporting research that aims to improve student learning in the development context.
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Implementing large-scale education assessments

ACER is helping education researchers, policymakers and practitioners understand the issues related to the inception, design, implementation and reporting of large-scale education assessments, as Geoff Masters explains.
A central question for governments and school systems around the world is what they can do to ensure that all students are equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for effective participation in the future workforce and for productive future citizenship.

To answer this question, countries require quality information on current levels of student achievement, the performances of subgroups of the student population – especially socio-economically disadvantaged students, Indigenous students and new arrivals – and recent trends in achievement levels within a country.

**Large-scale education assessments**

It is also important to understand how well a nation’s schools are performing in comparison with schools elsewhere in the world. Large-scale education assessments enable education policymakers, researchers and practitioners to investigate whether:

- some school systems are producing better outcomes overall
- some school systems have made improvements in achievement levels over time
- some school systems are more effective in ameliorating the influence of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational outcomes
- some school systems do a better job of developing the skills and attributes required for life and work in the 21st century.

*Implementation of Large-Scale Education Assessments*, edited by ACER’s Petra Lietz, John Cresswell and Ray Adams, and Keith Rust from Westat and the University of Maryland, has been designed to support researchers, policymakers and practitioners in undertaking such investigations.

In the decades since the 1960s, international comparative studies of student achievement and the factors underpinning differences in educational performance in different countries have evolved from a research interest of a handful of academics and educational research organisations to a major policy tool of governments across the globe.

**Monitoring progress and evaluating effectiveness**

International surveys now include the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), implemented in 75 countries in 2015, and the IEA’s Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), implemented in 59 countries in 2015. Both are managed by ACER in Australia. Other international surveys are conducted in areas such as primary school reading, civics and citizenship and ICT literacy. Governments use the results of these as well as significant regional assessment programs, often alongside results from their own national surveys, to monitor progress in improving quality and equity in school education and to evaluate the effectiveness of system-wide policies and programs.

Since the 1960s, there have also been significant advances in methodologies for the planning, implementation and use of international surveys – in effect, the evolution of a science of large-scale assessment. *Implementation of Large-Scale Education Assessments* maps an evolving methodology for large-scale educational assessments. Progress in this field has drawn on advances in specific disciplines and areas of practice, including psychometrics, test development, statistics, sampling theory and the use of new technologies of assessment.

The science of large-scale assessments is continuing to evolve. The challenges faced by the field include the need to collect useful, internationally comparable data on a broader range of skills and attributes than have typically been assessed in large-scale surveys. National education systems and governments are increasingly identifying skills and attributes such as collaboration, innovativeness, entrepreneurship and creativity as important outcomes of school education. The assessment of such attributes may require very different methods of observation and data gathering, including by capitalising on advances in assessment technologies.

An ongoing challenge will be to ensure that the results of large-scale assessments continue to meet their essential purpose: to inform and lead effective educational policies and practices to better prepare all students for life and work in the 21st century.

**In this issue**

In this issue of *International Developments* we investigate a synthesis of research evidence that identifies the impact of interventions that offer high value in meeting education’s greatest challenges in development contexts. We explore how ACER’s school assessments are playing a part in supporting improvements in teaching and learning, and we examine the benefits of a program to collect evidence of education quality for governments, schools, communities and students in the Pacific region.

This issue of *International Developments* also looks at ACER’s work with partners across South Asia to ensure inclusive and quality education for all, the development of a ‘road map’ for quality pre-primary education in Indonesia, work in Timor Leste to identify the impact of professional learning and mentoring on students’ learning outcomes and efforts to address educational gender disparities in Malawi.

**LINKS**

For more information about Implementation of Large-Scale Education Assessments, visit [https://shop.acer.edu.au/implementation-of-large-scale-education-assessments](https://shop.acer.edu.au/implementation-of-large-scale-education-assessments)

For more information about PISA, visit [www.oecd.org/pisa](http://www.oecd.org/pisa) and [www.acer.org/ozpisa](http://www.acer.org/ozpisa)

For more information about TIMSS, visit [http://timssandpirls.bc.edu](http://timssandpirls.bc.edu) and [www.acer.org/timss](http://www.acer.org/timss)
Super synthesis: Evidence of what works in education for development

A synthesis of research evidence identifies the impact of interventions that offer high value in meeting education’s greatest challenges in development contexts, as Jeaniene Spink explains.

A new at-a-glance report by ACER’s Education Analytics Service identifies what works when it comes to getting all children into school, keeping them in school, ensuring a quality education and ensuring they graduate with the knowledge, skills and abilities to make a positive difference in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Given the plethora of evaluations of intervention programs in education systems in the development context, as well as system-wide reforms, asking what works is not a simple question.

To address that, the education and development team at ACER and education team at Cardno have collaborated to develop a ‘super synthesis’ of evidence for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The super synthesis distils the findings from robust syntheses of the ‘what works in education’ research, in essence synthesising these syntheses into a brief, easy-to-use document.

ACER and Cardno’s super synthesis of evidence from 18 systematic reviews, meta-analyses and comparative reviews of what works in education for development identifies costed interventions as having the greatest impact on participation in education and on education quality.

The core of the report is a two-page at-a-glance table of evidence addressing seven domains: economic incentives; sector planning and financial reform; infrastructure, supplies and facilities; the teacher workforce; health care and nutrition; educational programs; and school management, communities and classrooms.

Each of the seven domains is evaluated across a series of intervention types in terms of the evidence of impact and cost, with evidence of impact on student participation and student learning outcomes rated on a four-point scale.

So do system-level investments work? According to the super synthesis, ‘The weight of evidence...shows that the lowest “evidence of impact” is in the sector planning (and) financial reform domain.’

Does that mean that it is not worth investing in education sector plans, or strengthening education monitoring information systems, or supporting...
the professional skills of Ministry of Education personnel?

‘Not at all,’ the authors of the super synthesis conclude. ‘Detailed sector planning, robust education statistics and skilled personnel represent the critical backbone of a well-functioning education system.’

The super synthesis reveals that educational programs like the provision of reading materials, especially in the early years, targeted teacher training, the provision of teaching materials and curriculum reform, and teacher workforce interventions like recruitment and retention reforms, improved personnel management information systems and performance-based contracts are both high impact and cost-effective in education for development.

The Education Analytics Service (EAS) was established by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, through its Education Section, to improve the extent and quality of evidence and expertise used to inform its education policy and programs. The EAS is managed by ACER and the Australian-based international development company Cardno.

LINKS

For more information on ACER’s education and development capability, visit [www.acer.org/research/areas-of-research/education-and-development](http://www.acer.org/research/areas-of-research/education-and-development)

For more information on Cardno, visit [http://www.cardno.com/en-au/MarketsandServices/Pages/Education.aspx](http://www.cardno.com/en-au/MarketsandServices/Pages/Education.aspx)

ACER assessments support research into evidence-based teaching and learning in England, as Mirkka Jokelainen explains.

Mirkka Jokelainen is Program Manager, School Assessment Services, at ACER UK.

Evaluating the impact of teaching assistants
Reliable evaluation of the impact of interventions and approaches is crucial if educators are to select and apply the most appropriate and effective strategies in the classroom when working with individual students.

ACER’s schools assessments are playing a part in supporting improvements in teaching and learning by providing accurate baseline and outcome information to inform decision-making by school and system leaders.

In England, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is committed to raising the attainment of 3–18 year olds, particularly those facing disadvantage. According to an analysis of results from the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment, students who are in the top 10 per cent of achievement nationally, but in the lowest quarter socio-economically, are around two-and-a-half years behind in learning than their more socio-economically advantaged peers.

To address this, EEF provides schools with free and evidence-based resources to improve teaching practice and student learning. Part of this work is to generate evidence on what works in education, and the EEF funds studies that evaluate teaching and learning programs and approaches.

The Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants (MITA) program has shown high-impact potential and is now being evaluated in an objective research study. The MITA approach has been developed at the Institute of Education at University College London and aims to ensure teaching assistants’ resources are appropriately targeted in the classroom and school. The program has been developed for school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants. With the right use of resources and clear roles, learning in the classroom is expected to improve.

To evaluate the impact of MITA, EEF has commissioned RAND Europe to conduct a two-year study. While the program is a whole-school approach to training, deploying and preparing teaching assistants, the study focuses on outcomes in two year groups. For children who are in Year 5 at the start of the trial, the impact of MITA will be evaluated based on their Key Stage 2 test results. Children who are in Year 2 at the start of the intervention program were assessed before the program was implemented, and will be assessed again at the end of the two-year intervention, at the end of Year 3. The assessments RAND Europe and EEF will use to measure the impact in this age group are ACER’s Essential Learning Metrics (ELMs).

ELMs has been developed for schools in England to measure learning in reading comprehension, mathematics, vocabulary and writing. For this study, a paper version of the digital tests was created.

The baseline assessment was completed in June 2017. ACER invigilators visited 120 schools participating in the study and administered the ELMs Reading Comprehension assessment to more than 6000 students in the intervention and control groups. The research seeks to confirm that, in comparison to the control group, MITA intervention:

- has a positive effect on student attainment
- results in improved deployment of teaching assistants
- results in change of practices
- has a positive effect on student engagement.

The outcome testing will be conducted in 2019 with the report on findings to be released in 2020.

Schools invest substantial resources when implementing new learning and teaching strategies, particularly in terms of the time and commitment of their teachers. For this reason it is important that they ensure their investment pays off. Valid and accurate assessment plays a key role in objectively evaluating the impact of new, and indeed, existing, teaching and learning strategies. ACER’s collaboration with RAND Europe demonstrates how high-quality assessments are supporting effective teaching and learning practice in schools.

**LINKS**


For more about the MITA program, visit [http://maximisingtas.co.uk](http://maximisingtas.co.uk)

For more about ELMs, visit [https://elms.acer.org](https://elms.acer.org)
The Pacific Community (SPC), through its Educational Quality and Assessment Program (EQAP), is working to address common education challenges, particularly in literacy and numeracy, in the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Established in 1980 to assist Pacific Islands countries to develop assessment procedures, EQAP is now a program of SPC, the region’s principal scientific and technical organisation supporting sustainable development.

In March 2018 the ACER-EQAP (Education Quality Assessment Programme) Partnership was launched. The launch acknowledged the Australian and New Zealand governments, together with ACER as the technical partner, in formalising a long-term commitment to support the Pacific Community in meeting education needs and goals in the region. The present commitment extends to 2023, with potential for an additional five years of support to 2028.

ACER’s technical support will contribute to the following education outcome areas:

- raising student achievement in literacy and numeracy
- improving teachers’ and principals’ accountabilities
- benchmarking factors contributing to educational quality
- increasing the education system’s capacity to use high quality data
- strengthening national accreditation and assessment systems
- providing high quality programmatic technical services and policy advice.

This partnership recognises ACER’s commitment to education in the region.

One of the significant aspects of the partnership is that ACER and EQAP are working to collect evidence of education quality for governments, schools, communities and students in the region. A key part of that effort is the implementation of the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA). The collaborative approach is enabling not only ongoing educational monitoring, but also capacity building in the Pacific region.
PILNA encourages a coordinated regional effort to achieve the long-term goal of improving outcomes in literacy and numeracy in the Pacific by establishing an evidence base to support decision-making and policy development in systems, schools and classrooms. PILNA provides a measurement of regional standards based on a common scale, which gives the region valid and reliable results to inform the improvement of student learning outcomes over time.

ACER is providing expertise and technical assistance in data analysis and reporting, and advice and guidance on project implementation in terms of the development, administration, analysis and reporting of PILNA. ACER is also supporting the development of capabilities and capacity within EQAP through the ongoing delivery of capacity support in the region. EQAP staff have also worked at ACER in Melbourne to finalise a design for a long-term implementation of PILNA.

Each cycle (to date 2012 and 2015) enables EQAP and education stakeholders to collect comparative and benchmarking data, monitor regional and national trends, evaluate the effectiveness of policies over time and identify appropriate intervention strategies. ACER is currently working with EQAP on PILNA 2018.

In the coming years, the partnership will support EQAP in a range of educational activities beyond learning assessment and PILNA. The overall EQAP-ACER partnership provides the opportunity to explore new ideas through an innovation funding program sponsored by DFAT. The partnership builds on ACER’s focus on supporting learners and learning professionals, leaders and managers of education systems, and supporting the Pacific’s learning society.

**LINKS**

Read more about ACER’s education and development work at [www.acer.org/research/areas-of-research/education-and-development](http://www.acer.org/research/areas-of-research/education-and-development)

To read the *Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) Regional Report*, visit [www.eqap.org.fj](http://www.eqap.org.fj)
As countries in South Asia mobilise efforts towards improving the quality of education in a bid to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 to ‘ensure inclusive and quality education for all’, ACER India’s work in capacity development to support student learning assessments has never been more relevant in the region.

In most developing countries, the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 to 2015 have driven progress in improving enrolment and access to education. Building on this, SDG 4 targets improvement in the quality of education, and focuses sharply on measuring change, monitoring growth and utilising data – all of which depend critically on assessment. In support of that goal, countries in South Asia are therefore seeking technical expertise to build their capacities for strengthening student assessments to monitor learning outcomes.

The recent World Development Report 2018 released by the World Bank elaborates three dimensions of the learning crisis that the world is facing, one of which is poor learning outcomes.

ACER India is working with partners across South Asia to ensure inclusive and quality education for all. Amit Kaushik reports on progress.

Amit Kaushik is CEO of ACER India.

From access to quality: improving learning outcomes in South Asia
To improve learning outcomes, countries are initiating education system reform by engaging with education experts and others to measure learning and foster change. In addition, the international community has begun to emphasise the development of 21st-century skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity needed to succeed in the rapidly changing world economy.

ACER India has provided capacity development and technical expertise to improve national student assessments in four South Asian countries.

ACER India’s work with partners in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, and Nepal is supporting capacity building in test development, data management, key statistical concepts and data analysis for large-scale assessments.

### Bangladesh

ACER India’s work in 2017 with the Monitoring and Evaluation Wing (MEW) of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education in the Bangladesh Ministry of Education has supported the rollout of the Learning Assessment of Secondary Institutions (LASI) for students in Grades 6, 8 and 10 in English, Bangla and Mathematics.

Previously, ACER India collaborated with the MEW to support the implementation of the learning assessment of Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project (SEQAEP) institutions. The partnership was renewed in 2015, when Bangladesh decided to scale up the assessment to cover a representative sample of all secondary institutions in the country, and renamed it LASI.

The 2017 project primarily involved capacity development of the LASI committee members in areas of test development and key concepts of learning assessments through several workshops in Bangladesh and India. As a part of this project, ACER India reviewed the assessment frameworks and test administration manual, developed test items and assessment tools for the pilot and final assessment, advised on survey instruments and sampling plans, supported administration of the pilot, and analysed the pilot data.

### India

ACER India in partnership with UNICEF India has provided technical assistance to Rajya Shiksha Kendra (RSK), Madhya Pradesh, in enhancing the capacity of state and district-level education officials to implement large-scale student learning assessments. Several workshops have been held to train them with skill sets necessary to design, implement, analyse, and report student learning assessments.

ACER India also supported the development of an assessment framework, test items and assessment tools, sampling plans, monitoring formats, and test administration manuals to ensure the smooth rollout of the learning assessment. In addition, ACER India has used psychometric analysis to examine data obtained from the existing learning assessment, Pratibha Parv, and has provided recommendations for improvements.

Under a new partnership with UNICEF India, ACER India is also involved in the capacity development of 170 education officials representing 17 UNICEF targeted states on robust learning assessments.

### Maldives

ACER India’s engagement with the Maldives National University has been in two distinct phases. In the first phase, ACER India developed course content for two masters units on assessment, ‘Introduction to Educational Testing’ and ‘Construction of Educational Tests’, offered by the Maldives National University. During this process, ACER India also conducted capacity development workshops for selected university staff addressing course content, and ACER’s approach to pedagogy and assessment.

In the second phase, ACER India staff taught the first unit of the course and supported university staff members in teaching the second unit.

### Nepal

In Nepal, ACER India’s ongoing work includes a series of capacity development workshops under the World Bank-funded capacity development program for the nation’s Education Review Office (ERO). The ERO is responsible for the National Assessment of Student Achievement, a low-stakes assessment carried out across private and public schools every two years. ACER India’s training will strengthen the capacity of ERO staff in data management, scale development, data analysis and reporting, key statistical concepts, and test theories required to conduct large-scale assessments. Before commencing the workshops, ACER India conducts a capacity assessment to identify existing ERO capacity pertaining to data management and analysis.

### Capacity building in South Asia

Capacity development is critical in ensuring that countries in South Asia can effectively, and in the long term independently, roll out learning assessments that have international rigour and are at the same time locally contextualised. To this end, ACER India is collaborating with key education stakeholders – governments, universities, international aid agencies, and not-for-profit organisations – in South Asia. This provides an opportunity to use learning assessment data to inform policy and practice, and to monitor progress towards ensuring inclusive and quality education for all.

### LINKS


To read the Sustainable Development Goals, visit [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment)
Driving early childhood education quality in Indonesia

ACER has developed a ‘road map’ for quality pre-primary education and support for parental education programs throughout Indonesia. Dan Cloney reports.

Research undertaken in the fields of neuroscience, health, education, culture and even economics shows that early childhood is the most important developmental phase of the human lifespan, with high-quality preventative early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs yielding higher returns than later remedial ones, according to James Heckman.

Quality universal early childhood education is one of the targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4.2 states that all nations of the world should, by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Work by ACER is contributing to the achievement of this goal in Indonesia. Indonesia has already made significant progress towards achieving SDG 4.2, with more than 12 million children enrolled in ECCE services. The focus of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture is now not only on providing ECCE services for children from 16 000 mostly remote and poor communities who are currently without access, but also on ensuring the quality of all services across the nation.

To support this, the Indonesian Education Sector Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership (ACDP) engaged ACER to conduct research to contribute towards the development of evidence-based policies and strategies for the universal provision of holistic, integrated, affordable, sustainable, high quality and equitable ECCE programs in Indonesia, particularly for marginalised populations.

ACER’s work involved developing a ‘road map’ for a one-year ‘Quality Pre-Primary Education for All’ program throughout Indonesia. ACER modelled the cost of ensuring that all villages have at least one ECCE service of sufficient quality, taking into account a minimum teacher salary and other non-salary operational costs including teaching-learning materials, equipment and resources, teacher training and additional teacher incentives.

Three case studies were carried out in Kota Jambi in Jambi Province, Banyuwangi District in East Java, and Kupang District in East Nusa Tenggara. These districts were selected to represent a range of experience with...
and commitment to ECCE. Eleven researchers visited the education offices of the selected district and their province to gather data and conduct interviews, before splitting into teams to gather further information through focus groups and onsite visits in two sub-districts.

Through data collection and a review of literature, ACER explored the challenges to the ECCE system in Indonesia related to policies, access, quality, costs and financing, and developed a set of recommendations to address these challenges.

Recognising that high-quality universal early childhood education cannot be achieved without the active and positive involvement – and therefore education – of parents, other caregivers and the community as a whole, the ACDP also sought ACER’s expertise in developing a supporting road map for a ‘Quality Parenting Education’ program. Designed for parents and caregivers of children from birth to six years, the program aims to provide communities with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to support children’s growth, protection and development.

ACER identified cooperation and synchronisation between the departments providing parenting programs, improving the quality of parenting facilitators and the development of standards for parenting materials as necessary elements of the roadmap towards more comprehensive, systematic and effective parenting education.

While the most disadvantaged children experience the most dramatic gains from ECCE programs, they are also the least likely to be enrolled. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture is unique, at least in Southeast Asia, for understanding that its national agenda and the SDGs around ECCE cannot be achieved without also supporting the involvement of parents and caregivers.

**LINKS**

To read James Heckman’s research on the lifecycle benefits of an influential early childhood program, visit [https://heckmanequation.org/resource/research-summary-lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program](https://heckmanequation.org/resource/research-summary-lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program)

To read the Sustainable Development Goals, visit [http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment)
ACER’s work in Timor Leste is seeking to identify the impact of professional learning and mentoring on student learning outcomes over time, as Adeola Capel explains.
The Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has engaged ACER to conduct a longitudinal evaluation from 2017 to 2021 of the Timor Leste Professional Learning and Mentoring Program (PLMP) which runs from 2016 to 2021, in order to provide policymakers with an understanding of the extent to which the PLMP and the introduction of a new curriculum in Timor Leste supports school leaders and teachers to improve teaching practice, and student learning outcomes.

The PLMP is one program under the $120 million Australia Timor-Leste Partnership for Human Development, a five-year, multi-sector partnership addressing health, education, water, sanitation, nutrition, gender, disability and social protection.

The PLMP aims to build leadership and teacher capacity to enable sustained improvement in teaching practice over time in order to improve student outcomes.

Launched in April 2016 and being rolled out nationally over five years, the program involves tailored training for school leaders backed up by regular classroom observation and in-classroom mentoring of teachers by international and national mentors.

Designed with the Timor Leste Ministry of Education, the PLMP aims to support teachers to effectively implement the National Basic Education Curriculum, which includes understanding new curriculum content and new pedagogies. Key foci of the program include:

- continuous teacher professional development
- strong school leadership
- systems to assess student learning outcomes
- systems to support and evaluate teacher performance.

The longitudinal evaluation of the PLMP will use both quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand the extent to which the PLMP supports leaders and teachers to develop teaching knowledge and to change teaching practices over time. ACER will also investigate the extent to which teacher participation in PLMP leads to improvements in learning outcomes for students.

The PLMP longitudinal evaluation is one result of recommendations in DFAT’s Investing in Teachers evaluation, which examined Australia’s recent and current investments in teacher development, including desk reviews of 27 bilateral Australian aid investment programs. The Investing in Teachers report found almost no data on outcomes that could be attributed to DFAT’s teacher development investments, and determined that it was impossible to judge whether teacher development has led to improved teaching practices or improved student learning outcomes.

The Investing in Teachers report recommended that DFAT should work systematically to improve its monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of investments in teacher development. In its management response, DFAT committed to support a series of multi-year studies on teacher development investments to evaluate the effects of teacher development on teacher knowledge and practice, and student learning.

The PLMP longitudinal evaluation commenced in 2017. ACER is due to report its findings in 2020.

LINKS

For more information about ACER’s education and development research program, visit www.acer.org/research/areas-of-research/education-and-development

Enhancing girls’ access to high-quality education is a global priority that is articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It is also a national priority in Malawi. ACER was contracted to conduct a sector review of girls’ primary and secondary education in Malawi for UNICEF and Malawi’s Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST). The review aimed to:

- outline the current context and challenges relating to girls’ education in Malawi
- identify the key factors contributing to gender inequalities in educational access and outcomes
- provide an overview of the policies and strategies currently in place to enhance girls’ education
- provide recommendations to help feed into future policy and program decisions.

ACER gathered comprehensive information about the context of girls’ education in Malawi through consultations with key stakeholders who work in girls’ education in Malawi in addition to information presented from relevant literature.

Despite major progress in increasing the number of girls who attend primary school, girls in Malawi continue to be disadvantaged, particularly in terms of their access to secondary school and in their educational outcomes. Both boys and girls also have high levels of grade repetition and school dropout, and often commence school later than the official starting age of six years.

The literature review identified three overarching factors that contribute to educational gender disparities in Malawi: sociocultural factors, school infrastructure and facility factors, and economic factors.

**Sociocultural factors**

In 2016, the ratio of students to qualified teachers in Malawi was 80:1. The student–teacher ratio was lower in urban schools (67:1) than in rural schools (82:1). By comparison, UNESCO’s Education for All recommended target is 40:1.

Malawi has lower numbers of female teachers compared to male teachers, particularly in secondary schools and in rural schools.

Ensuring there are sufficient numbers of female teachers who can act as role models for girls is a priority for Malawi. Steps to reduce student–teacher ratios and to increase the numbers of female teachers in Malawi are already being undertaken. In addition to recruiting and training additional teachers, particularly female teachers, effort is being made to provide grants for teachers to work in rural areas and to increase the number of schools offering both morning and afternoon shifts.

Malawi has historically had one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with a 2015 study reporting that 50 per cent of girls are married before age 18. In 2015, marriage was said to account for 16 per cent of school dropouts, making it the third most common reason for girls dropping out of secondary school after school fees (27 per cent) and pregnancy (27 per cent).

In February 2017, the Malawi Government adopted a constitutional amendment that raised the legal age of marriage from 15 years to 18 years, and efforts to annul customary marriages are ongoing.

**School infrastructure and facility factors**

Many students in Malawi have to travel long distances to school. A walk of 30 minutes or longer to the nearest primary school was experienced by 38 per cent of households, and to the nearest high school by 80 per cent. Compounding this is the fact that a significant number of schools become inaccessible during the rainy season. Constructing additional schools and girls’ hostels, and providing bicycles have been identified as ways to reduce travel times. This in turn reduces opportunities for gender-based violence against girls while they travel to and from school, which is another issue affecting their attendance.
A lack of adequate sanitation facilities can have an impact on girls’ attendance rates, particularly once girls reach puberty. While not unique to the education of girls, other resource constraints in Malawian schools include shortages of classrooms, desks, stationery and instructional materials, with two or three students often sharing one textbook. Ensuring the quality and appropriateness of school resources is also important, including ensuring that curriculum and textbooks portray positive female role models.

**Economic factors**

Recent studies indicate that around half of the population in Malawi live below the national poverty line and around a quarter do not consume the minimum recommended daily food requirement. This can make it very difficult for families, particularly large families, to afford to send all of their children to school.

While primary education is free and school feeding programs have been introduced in some schools, there remain the associated costs such as transportation and school supplies. Secondary school fees are often not affordable for families without the assistance of scholarships. It is estimated that around 23 per cent of primary students and 39 per cent of secondary students drop out of school for financial reasons.

It has previously been observed that opportunity costs rather than direct costs contribute to challenges in school attendance for girls. Studies have shown that girls in Malawi are more likely than boys to spend over 28 hours a week doing household chores and that girls are twice as likely to drop out of school because of household duties.

**Recommendations**

The government of Malawi along with donors and NGOs have already taken important steps in enhancing girls’ education. Seven priorities to further enhance girls’ education in Malawi were identified as part of this research.

1. Build the evidence base about what works in girls’ education in Malawi.
2. Develop a database of girls’ education programs and organisations that support girls’ education to enhance collaboration and identify gaps in support.
3. Focus on supporting school completion and transitions between all levels of education and into the workforce.
4. Focus on enhancing the quality of education through the provision of well-trained teachers, as well as high-quality curriculum and assessment practices and learning resources.
5. Continue to focus on addressing inequality, particularly for girls with special needs and from families with a low socioeconomic status.
6. Review current government structure for coordinating girls’ education programs to ensure efficiency and prioritisation of supporting girls’ education.
7. Prioritise initiatives that support community and government ownership and build capacity.

Among those consulted as part of this research, there was a strong common drive from government stakeholders, NGOs and donors to implement evidence-based initiatives to provide holistic support to girls. The importance of working in a collaborative manner and involving the community, district and national-level stakeholders cannot be overstated.

**Further information:**

To read the 2017 report *Girls’ Primary and Secondary Education in Malawi: Sector Review* by Sally Robertson and Elizabeth Cassity (ACER) and Esthery Kunkwenzu (University of Malawi) for UNICEF and the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, visit https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/31

For more on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, visit www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education
Latest from ACER international offices

ACER INDONESIA

Baseline Study for the Modelling of Universal Pre-Primary Education

ACER is currently working on a baseline study on early childhood education, supported by UNICEF in Indonesia and the IKEA Foundation. Under this project, ACER surveyed 140 early childhood development centres with a total of 5600 respondents. The study aims to review the current state of early childhood development in the district and open the discussion about the future approach and development of UNICEF intervention programs in the Bogor District.

INOVASI

ACER, in partnership with the Regional Economic Development Institute (REDI), were selected to be part of the research panel for INOVASI (Innovation for Indonesian School Children). The first project for the consortium is the Education and Learning Innovation Survey (Survey Inovasi Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran Indonesia/SIPPI) in five districts in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) and two districts in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). The result of the survey will be used as the baseline for the pilot of upcoming INOVASI programs. The survey involved around 75 schools and 4600 respondents.

Support to the National Assessment Center

ACER, in partnership with Cambridge Education, was commissioned by Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership (ACDP) to support the national assessment center (Puspendik). ACER supported Puspendik to develop a world class assessment program, provided advice on national examination, national contextual questionnaire framework and many other documents, as well as organising capacity building activities such as workshops on item writing, civics and citizenship, and classroom based assessment. Other activities were to provide assistance for Puspendik computer-based testing team and IT support for trial tests.

Curriculum Reform Project

The Ministry of Education and Culture developed Kurikulum 2013 (Curriculum 2013) as a national response to the school-based curriculum introduced in 2006 that decentralised educational responsibilities for improvement. However, the curriculum has faced some challenges. ACER was commissioned by ACDP to provide tools and guidelines to build capacity among Indonesian teachers and educators to monitor, evaluate, and implement Kurikulum 2013. They helped to design, produce, and evaluate specimen lessons in core subjects at primary and junior secondary grade levels as models for K13 implementation, and assisted Puskurbuk staff to learn about curriculum implementation in Singapore, South Korea, India and the Philippines.
ACER INDIA

Evaluation of Scaling-Up Teacher Professional Development for Quality Education, Jordan

ACER India won an evaluation project in Jordan funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD), Canada. The work under this project entails conducting an external, independent, formative (mid-term) evaluation of DFATD-funded Scaling-Up Teacher Professional Development for Quality Education (TPD4QE) project. The evaluation will be carried out to conform with ‘OECD/DAC (2010) Quality Standards for Development Evaluation’, and best practices in evaluation.

Five regional workshops on learning assessment

ACER India, with support from UNICEF India, conducted five regional workshops, to build the capacities of approximately 170 state education officials who represent 17 UNICEF targeted states on robust learning assessment. The five workshops in Guwahati, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Pune and New Delhi were designed to raise the skill levels of staff members on implementing learning assessments.

Evaluation of early-grade reading in five states in India

ACER India is conducting an evaluation for USAID-funded READ Alliance project implemented by Centre for Knowledge Societies (CKS). ACER India is developing and administering the early-grade reading assessment in the intervention areas of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, New Delhi, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. Some elements of the evaluation include: developing early grade reading tools and adapting them to local languages; piloting; sampling; administering the study; monitoring and analysing the assessment data. The evaluation also involves developing contextual questionnaires to obtain information on the processes involved in the implementation of early-grade reading intervention.

Strengthening of learning assessment capacities

As a technical partner to UNICEF India, ACER India conducted a series of workshops to strengthen the capacities of the state and district level officials to implement rigorous student learning assessments in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Components of technical support include the development of assessment framework and assessment items; capacity building workshops; technical standards; questionnaires to gather contextual information; field operation manual; sampling plan and sample; monitoring formats; data processing manual and test data codebook; reports and communication materials.
Technical assistance to Learning Assessment of Secondary Institutions (LASI)

ACER India supported the Monitoring and Evaluation Wing (MEW), Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), Ministry of Education, Bangladesh to implement LASI 2017 in the disciplines of English, Mathematics and Bangla for Grades 6, 8 and 10. ACER has supported the implementation of the learning assessment since 2012.

Components of the support include: review of assessment frameworks; test item development; review of survey questionnaires; review of sampling plan; review of the administration manual; support in administration of pilot; analysis of pilot study data; support in the training of test administrators; supervisors; test markers; and data entry staff; and creation of assessment tools for final survey.

ACER UAE

The PISA-Based Test for Schools

The OECD has introduced the PISA-Based Test for Schools to help schools to benchmark their performance in PISA. All Grade 10/Year 11 students from the UAE participated in the PISA-Based Test for Schools which was administered between April and May in 2017. ACER UAE was appointed as the national service provider to administer and manage the test in the UAE and to analyse the data. To ensure effective and smooth administration of the test, ACER UAE conducted workshops for school coordinators and test administrators.

Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) is a research-based survey developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and is the first international survey that focuses on the learning environment and the dynamics of teaching in schools across a country. The purpose of the study is to investigate the characteristics of teachers and schools, teacher practices and classroom environment, the importance of school leadership as well as ways in which teaching is improved by using appraisal and feedback. The study offers an opportunity for teachers and principals to have an impact on education analysis and policy development. It is designed to provide data that help countries identify challenges and learn about policies and practices in other countries that face similar issues. ACER UAE is the agency appointed by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority to assist with the coordination and implementation of TALIS 2018 in Dubai.

ACER UK

Assessments to support research into evidence-based teaching and learning

ACER UK is working with RAND Europe on a study to evaluate the impact of a program that is designed to ensure teaching assistants’ resources are appropriately targeted in the classroom and school. The intervention program has been developed by University College London. ACER’s ELMs assessments are used as baseline and outcome measures in the study.

Scottish National Standardised Assessments provide diagnostic information to support teachers’ professional judgment

Assessments in reading, writing and numeracy have been developed and delivered as part of the National Improvement Framework for Scottish education. The assessments were introduced in August 2017 and by May 2018 over 349 000 have been taken. There is no pass or fail. The results provide teachers with objective, comparable diagnostic information about progress, which will help improve outcomes for all children and young people.

Essential Learning Metrics help identify what pupils know, understand and can do

The ELMs assessment suite for mathematics, reading, vocabulary and writing match the new National Curriculum in England and help focus on progressive achievement over time. This ensures that high expectations can be held for every pupil’s progress, regardless of their starting point.