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INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENTS

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Australian Council for Educational Research

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is one of the world's leading educational research organisations.

Since its establishment in 1930, ACER has built a strong reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policymakers and professional practitioners. Our goal is to support every learner, every learning professional, every learning institution and our learning society through our work.

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 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 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.

ACER has been engaged in significant collaborative work with

the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), including as the leading partner in a consortium responsible for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for many years.

ACER has been admitted to an official partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Further, it collaborates with UNESCO through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the UNESCO Office in Bangkok on a variety of programs to support effective monitoring of learning outcomes and provide empirical evidence to inform educational policy.

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 school education through the systematic collection of data on educational outcomes to inform global and national policies and practices in education.

ACER through its education and development research program focuses on conducting research

that supports emerging countries to improve student learning.

ACER has grown steadily in recent decades with a strong focus on improving learning across geographies. It opened its Sydney office in 2002, followed by offices in Dubai and New Delhi in 2004, Brisbane in 2006, Perth in 2007, Adelaide in 2009, London in 2014, and Jakarta in 2015. In 2018, ACER opened a representative office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia deepening its commitment to improving learning in the Asia-Pacific region.

ACER is a member of the Network on Education Quality Monitoring in the Asia-Pacific (NEQMAP) that supports strengthening of education systems through knowledge sharing, research and capacity building.

Through its international offices, ACER is well-positioned to collaborate with local governments and partners to undertake educational research, large-scale assessments, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation programs for a range of clients. Committed and passionate ACER teams work collaboratively with colleagues across the world to deliver high quality education programs that support countries to adopt and implement education reforms with the ultimate goal of improving learning.

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In this issue... ▶



Improving learning for all



*Prof Geoff Masters AO
is CEO of ACER.*

Improving learning has become a global priority thanks to the United Nations and its Sustainable Development Goal 4. Challenges may vary according to country context but the aim is universal: to provide the best education possible within each local system. **Geoff Masters** explains.

As in many countries, the national curriculum in Australia ties what a student is expected to learn to their year level. Teachers are expected to deliver the same year-level curriculum to all students and to assess and grade them on how well they perform. Attempting to lift performances by holding all students to the same expectation flies in the face of what we know about learning, and this is a problem.

Many students find the year-level curriculum is either well within their comfort zone or so far ahead of them that they are unable to engage with it meaningfully. Students enter each school year with widely different levels of attainment; the most advanced 10 per cent of students are about five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent. As a result, less advanced students often are not ready for, and more advanced students often are not adequately challenged by, the year-level curriculum.

People learn best when given learning opportunities at an appropriate level of challenge: beyond their comfort zone, but not so far beyond that they become frustrated and give up.

A review of the Australian curriculum in 2018 proposed redefining how we set learning expectations in schools. Instead of packaging the curriculum into year levels, wherever possible the curriculum would be presented as a sequence of increasing proficiency levels in a subject. Some interpreted this as requiring teachers to develop an individual learning plan for every student (impossible in practice) or as the abolition of year levels, which is unnecessary; there are often good social reasons to keep students of the same age together.

The concept of proficiency levels unrelated to age or year levels is familiar

in areas such as music and language learning and recognises that there are different levels of attainment within a student cohort.

The best teachers already understand that some students may be two or three years ahead of year-level expectations and others may be two or three years behind. Many currently work to ascertain where individuals are in their learning, and to teach accordingly, to meet students' differing learning needs and to ensure that every student is appropriately challenged.

Evidence-based teaching

Improvements in student learning and educational outcomes depend on the wider use of reliable evidence in classroom practice. The concept of evidence-based practice has its origins in medicine, with the essential idea that decisions made by medical practitioners should be based on the best available evidence collected through rigorous research – ideally, through randomised controlled trials.

Evidence-based teaching similarly involves the integration of reliable, local, practitioner-collected evidence with evidence from systematic, external research. Policies and discussions of 'evidence-based teaching' sometimes overlook the importance of this broader, more integrated understanding of the role of evidence in teaching and learning.

Evidence-based teaching draws on evidence for three purposes:

- To ascertain the points individual learners have reached in their learning
- To inform effective teaching strategies and interventions
- To evaluate student progress and teaching effectiveness.

Looking ahead

If we are serious about improving learning for all, it's time we recognised the importance of evidence from research and reconsidered current models of schooling. How appropriate are age-based curricula in a 21st century setting? Is this the best way to support teachers and students? Would success at school be better measured in terms of the progress learners make, regardless of their starting point, rather than the achievement of year-level benchmarks? The research evidence certainly seems to support this.

In this issue

In this issue of *International Developments*, we summarise the research evidence gathered through our work and the impact our projects make around the globe. We recognise the region-specific education challenges and discover the global and national commitments of countries to address those challenges. We explore how ACER's technical assistance is supporting countries, especially developing countries, in strengthening their national assessment systems. The issue examines research on pedagogies, innovations that support knowledge sharing, and high quality assessments that are delivered online to meet the learning needs of individual students.

As many education systems, particularly in developing countries, are undergoing a transformation, our work promotes and supports the generation of evidence essential for improvements in the quality of education. ■

LINKS

This article draws on original material by Professor Geoff Masters, AO published in www.teachermagazine.com.au in 2018.



Building capacity for Bhutan's learning assessment



Dr Mee Young Han is Director, Research & Assessment, ACER India

ACER is supporting development of Bhutan's National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) and strengthening local capacity for its implementation. **Dr Mee Young Han** reports.

In light of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, countries in South Asia are strategically prioritising the strengthening of their learning assessment systems. Robust learning assessments provide high-quality data on the learning levels of students. The evidence collected is used to monitor progress and inform decision-making in education policy and practice. The development of a national assessment framework is a prerequisite for establishing a reliable national assessment that effectively measures the achievements of students.

Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA), Royal Government of Bhutan, commissioned ACER India to develop Bhutan's National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) and develop the capacity of BCSEA to measure the quality of education at key stages of learning (Class III, VI and IX). The project has three distinct areas:

- Development of high-quality NEAF in consultation with Bhutan's education stakeholders
- Capacity development of BCSEA in robust assessments
- Technical support for the implementation of the National Education Assessment (NEA) that students will take at the end of Class III in English and mathematics in 2020 and 2021.

Through intensive capacity development, the aim is to ensure that BCSEA has the knowledge and technical proficiency to implement a high-quality NEA. In addition to capacity building, ACER India will support the

development of processes, systems, protocols, manuals, and methodologies with the intention of bringing global best practice in learning assessments to Bhutan's national assessment system.

ACER India conducted a workshop in Paro, Bhutan, which was attended by 37 participants nominated by BCSEA, including the Minister of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan. Participants were introduced to the five key areas of a robust assessment. ACER India experts briefed participants about the importance and components of the assessment framework, and technical standards.

ACER India prepared an initial draft of the NEAF for Classes III, VI and X prior to the workshop. The draft was not only curriculum-based but also aimed to address competencies in each domain. ACER India experts conceptualised the structure of the framework and the approach to assessing English, mathematics and science.

The development of the framework is conceived as a participatory process. The input from BCSEA and other experts present at the workshop ensured that the framework acknowledges local country-specific concerns and at the same time incorporates the international standards of large-scale national assessments. The resulting assessment framework draft was reviewed by a committee, which was composed of representatives from BCSEA, teachers, curriculum experts from the Royal Education Council (REC) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) and specifically formed for revisions and finalisation of the NEAF.

At the second workshop in April 2019 participants from BCSEA, REC and MoE, were joined by attendees from the Special Education Needs (SEN) division. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss the changes suggested by the review committee and bring consistency in different domain chapters.

Additionally, a session was organised to explore accommodations for students with disabilities. The possibility of including a chapter in the NEAF on the accommodations and adaptations necessary to effectively assess the learning outcomes of students with disabilities was discussed. However, the decision to include children with disabilities in the NEAF is still under consideration.

The workshop also focused on incorporation of 21st century skills, bearing in mind the nine student attributes defined in the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–24. Skills or attributes that can be included in the assessment domains were identified for each subject. The criteria for their inclusion were discussed in detail.

The ACER India team visited both mainstream and special education schools to observe education practices and develop an understanding of schooling in Bhutan.

The framework will be finalised in July 2019. The next phase of the project is dedicated to institutional capacity building on the implementation of the NEA. BCSEA is planning to roll out a pilot survey in March 2020, followed by the main survey for Class III in October 2020. ■



Scottish national assessments inform next steps for learning

ACER works with the Scottish Government, in partnership with Twig and SCHOLAR, to develop and deliver assessments of literacy and numeracy learning progress. Since 2017, more than a million assessments have been completed by children and young people throughout Scotland.

The Scottish Government commissioned ACER led consortium to develop and deliver the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) as part of the National Improvement Framework which outlined the Scottish Government's plan to deliver improvements in education. The framework was developed in 2016 to support high quality learning and teaching and intended to provide robust, consistent, and transparent data to extend understanding of what works and drive improvements across all parts of the system.

To meet these aims it was essential to gather data on children's progress at key points in their education, including data on differences between those from the least and most deprived areas. One of the seven key drivers of this improvement, "Assessing Children's Progress", made specific reference to using data to achieve excellence and equity and introduced the use of national standardised assessments. Improved data of this kind would support the planning of further interventions to ensure that all learners achieve their best results and this information would be provided by the SNSA.

The assessments have been available for use in publicly funded schools since August 2017. The assessments have been constructed specifically to assess and align with the literacy and numeracy elements of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, which was also introduced in 2017. ACER introduced the assessments in a short period of time, with only 10 months between the commencement of the project and the start of live assessments.

Scottish children and young people are now assessed at the ages of 4, 7, 11 and 14 (Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7, and Secondary 3), once in each school year. The flexible delivery model

allows children and young people to be assessed at any time in the school year that is judged suitable for the school, class and individual learner. The SNSA are delivered online on a range of devices, they are automatically scored and the reports to schools and teachers are provided as soon as a learner completes an assessment. Additional reports are available for local authorities.

The assessments are online, adaptive and selected assessments have audio support. Each learner is presented with a similar number of items, but the difficulty of the pathway completed by different learners varies according to their performance on earlier questions. The adaptive nature of the SNSA means that the experience for each learner is modified so that the assessment is neither too hard nor too easy, but appropriate for their level of capacity. The adaptive design also means the diagnostic value of the assessment is optimised.

The SNSA is not a 'high stakes' assessment. The approach is based around next steps in learning. The focus is on formative, diagnostic assessment to improve learning and teaching, so an adaptive model helps to maximise the diagnostic information available for each learner. Reports include both diagnostic information and information on the learner's capacities in relation to a national norm. The assessments are not intended for use as an accountability tool and the Scottish Government have made great efforts to ensure they do not have access to data that could be used for such purposes.

The assessments are designed to accommodate the needs of children and young people who require additional support and the system is designed to be compatible with a range of assistive devices. Learners can use the devices they are familiar with from their everyday use in the classroom to support

them in completing the assessments, including software and devices such as text readers, screen readers, and switches. Detailed guidance is available for teachers in relation to Additional Support Needs (ASN) and English as an Additional Language (EAL).

The information gathered from the SNSA provides teachers with diagnostic information on aspects of reading, writing and numeracy to support the teacher's professional judgement and assessment of children's progress to plan next steps in learning. The SNSA complement the assessment information gathered from everyday learning situations, and through observation and interaction with children and young people. The SNSA platform is user-friendly, and training and help materials are provided for teachers.

The reports focus on providing tools that enable schools to identify areas of strength and weakness to better target future learning and teaching, and also to provide summary data on performance across a cohort. Future reports will be able to look at performance and progress over time.

Any questions and queries about the SNSA and its platform are handled by a service desk throughout the school year. ■

LINKS

Find out more about SNSA at <https://standardisedassessment.gov.scot/> or in the National report for academic year 2017 to 2018 (PDF) at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-national-standardised-assessments-national-report-academic-year-2017-2018/>

Find out more information about the Scottish National Improvement Framework at <https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/national-improvement-framework/>

Examining the impact of Australia Awards around the world



Dr Daniel Edwards is the Research Director of ACER's Tertiary Education research program.

ACER is evaluating the long-term contributions of Australia Awards alumni through the Global Tracer Facility funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). **Dan Edwards** reports

Since the 1950s, more than 80 000 Australia Awards and predecessor Australian Government scholarships and fellowships have been conferred to emerging leaders from developing countries. The Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and run by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), is investigating the development contributions of Australia Awards alumni and the long-term impact of the scholarships and fellowships.

In the inaugural year, ACER researchers working in the facility contacted more than 1500 alumni from 27 countries who had completed their scholarships between 2006 and 2010 to participate in a Tracer survey. The online survey provided insights into the alumni's use of expertise and knowledge and their involvement in networking in their home countries. Some of the findings are highlighted below:

- 98 per cent have transferred their skills and knowledge to others in their home countries.
- 97 per cent have pioneered improved practices and innovations in their work.
- 40 per cent have remained in touch with fellow scholarship alumni.
- 26 per cent have contact with Australian alumni.
- 55 per cent have a professional link with Australia.

In its second year the survey focused on alumni who studied in Australia between 1996 and 2005, while research in Year 3 focuses on alumni who studied in Australia between 2006 and 2011.

In addition to the online survey, ACER researchers conduct telephone interviews with more than 500 alumni each year, and also dig even deeper into the results through case studies in-country that illustrate the outcomes of the Australia Awards.

For these case studies, the researchers visit the home countries of the alumni, interviewing them, their colleagues and other stakeholders to collect data and understand their experience. These in-depth research pieces focus on a specific sector or field of expertise. Examples from the case studies undertaken are outlined below.

Indonesia

The Indonesian alumni of Australia Awards who studied education in Australia between 2006 and 2010 are helping to rebuild the education system in the tsunami-affected regions of their home country. The 2004 tsunami wreaked havoc in Indonesia, destroying schools in disadvantaged regions and killing more than 1500 teachers.

After completing their studies in Australia and returning to Indonesia, two of the alumni interviewed from Aceh, Ms Eridafitri Muchtar and Dr Fadliadi Ubit, supported the professional development of teachers in the tsunami-affected disadvantaged regions.

Flinders University alumna Ms Muchtar became a teacher-trainer training English language teachers in Aceh and the surrounding region. Under the Australia Awards English Language Teaching Assistance program (ELTA), she was involved in the professional development of teachers in remote areas including Maluku, Papua, Papua Barat, East Nusa Tenggara and West Nusa Tenggara. Another Flinders University alumnus, Dr Fadliadi, helped teachers undertake professional development for improving their teaching and pedagogical skills.

The interviewed alumni said that they have contributed to teacher training, curriculum reform, and improving pedagogy in the Indonesian education sector.

Solomon Islands

The interviews of Solomon Islands alumni studying health degrees in the period from the mid-to late-2000s revealed that upon return they are contributing to the health services of their home countries. With a range of valuable expertise gathered in infectious diseases and epidemiology, dental care, health education and health policy, they are making notable contributions in bringing a positive change in maternal and child health and to the professional development of health workers.

Australia Awards alumni reported contributing to leadership within the health sector, knowledge sharing in the workplace and beyond, national health policies and practices, and the health



outcomes of the community, thus addressing the challenges of universal health care in the region.

China

Fellowship alumni in China who completed their education in Australia between 2007 and 2010 are using their Australian skills and knowledge to improve health and water management practices. After receiving specialised training from prestigious Australian institutions in water resource management, climate change and public health, alumni testified that they were taught to think differently.

Alumnus Dr Hou Xiaohui, who studied at Griffith University, contributed to the Shanghai Declaration on promoting health in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, on behalf of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2016. Alumna Ms Fan Jie described her course at the International Water Centre (IWC) as far more advanced than courses offered in water management and hydrology in China. She was particularly impressed by the way her course changed her mindset about promoting water conservation through public campaigns.

In addition, other outcomes of the fellowships include research collaborations, working partnerships between many of the individuals and institutions involved, and MoUs between Chinese and Australian organisations.

Mongolia

The findings of the research in Mongolia reveal that Australia Awards alumni

are making notable contributions to professionalism, international credibility, and sustained growth of the financial sector. They are engaged in enhancing financial practices and supporting the capacity strengthening of their colleagues. In addition, they are involved in building core national development strategies, such as the 'Mongolia Sustainable Development Vision 2030'.

Alumni acquired a range of skills in project management, financial monitoring and auditing, intercultural competencies, networking, corporate governance, and policy development that they are now applying to the Mongolia financial sector. The study cites that Australian expertise is highly coveted in Mongolia and Australia Awards are the 'best' scholarship program available to emerging leaders.

Inclusiveness is one of the important goals of the Australia Awards. The awards have been successful in promoting gender equality by establishing policies in Mongolia but have only partially achieved the inclusion of people with disability due to systemic barriers.

Vanuatu

Evidence from Vanuatu suggests that alumni are making contributions to the legal and judicial sectors with their Australian-made skills. Some of the positive changes they have brought to the systems include improvements in customs and policing governance, introduction of specialised legal knowledge and practice in the

workforce, and upskilling in the legal, police and customs workforces.

Many alumni have contributed to the development of national goals in Vanuatu. The study also noted that the alumni had 'mutually beneficial' professional ties with Australia, as well as 'strong, positive views' about their host country.

The research-based project designed to evaluate the contributions of Australia Awards alumni will continue until 2020. The project will provide robust insights into the alumni's use of skills and knowledge developed overseas during their fellowship period in Australia. ■

LINKS

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Developing a tool for analysing national assessment systems



Ursula Schwantner, Senior Research Fellow, ACER

A joint initiative between the Global Partnership for Education and ACER supports countries in analysing national learning assessment systems.



Countries around the globe are consolidating efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for Education that emphasises improving the quality of education. Data on learning outcomes provide empirical evidence on the quality of education and support building stronger education systems.

A report released by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in 2017 highlighted the worldwide 'learning crisis', with an estimated 617 million children and adolescents finding it difficult to read a sentence or perform simple mathematics despite attending school. Clearly, the quality of education systems is a huge challenge in many contexts.

In this context, there has been an increasing emphasis on learning assessment. Regardless of the kind of assessment, be it large-scale assessments at national, regional or international levels, public examinations or classroom assessments, the evidence gathered can be powerful if used for decision making. Practitioners can use the data to inform teaching and learning, while policymakers can make informed decisions for system-level planning purposes.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Secretariat appointed the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to develop a tool for analysing national assessment systems and identifying areas for improvement. Known as the Analysis of National Learning Assessment Systems (ANLAS), it provides a framework and tools that help countries, particularly GPE partner developing countries, to examine their national learning assessments and design strategies to address any gaps.

This work is part of GPE's broader commitment to improving learning outcomes and building effective and efficient learning systems, which are two of the three goals in its strategic plan (known as GPE 2020). These goals are reflected in GPE's implementation grants at country level as well as a



global initiative known as Assessment for Learning (A4L). A4L aims to enhance learning assessment systems across countries and to promote a holistic measurement of learning, and ANLAS is a core component of this effort.

ANLAS is a diagnostic tool that helps to evaluate learning assessment systems. The recommendations support improvements through the development of effective policies, structures and practices. After all, the aim of strengthening assessment systems is to gain relevant data to further improve education quality.

The key features of ANLAS are its diagnostic function, cross-sectional consideration of 21st century skills and the integration of the analysis and findings into the education sector planning process. The development of the ANLAS toolkit commenced in June 2018. Following a pilot implementation in three GPE partner countries, Ethiopia, Vietnam and Mauritania, the toolkit will

be refined, with planned completion in August 2019.

ANLAS is conceived as a country-led, participative process. The analysis is undertaken in collaboration with key education stakeholders – representing the Ministry of Education at national and provincial levels, external assessment agencies, development partners, civil society or private organisations and teacher organisations.

ANLAS pilots

The ANLAS pilots are designed to validate the content of the toolkit, examine the process of using these resources to analyse the national learning assessment system and provide recommendations to inform improvement strategies. In collaboration with partners, the GPE Secretariat selected three countries for piloting ANLAS: Ethiopia, Mauritania and Vietnam.

The country selection was based on country interest and demand, planned

period of the next Education Sector Plan, the existence of different modalities of assessment and policy interest in assessment of 21st century skills.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia was the first country to undertake the piloting of ANLAS. A national team led by the National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency (NEAEA) was established, with representation from relevant directorates of the Federal Ministry of Education. ACER trained and worked with the national team to plan the pilot implementation. The GPE Secretariat then undertook a mission to Addis Ababa in January 2019 to engage with the national team and stakeholders about ANLAS and Ethiopia's participation in the initiative.

The stakeholder briefing was attended by several NEAEA officials, relevant directorates of the Ministry and representatives of development partners. ACER worked with the

Ethiopia national team to support the data collection, analysis and reporting process, providing in-country support in Addis Ababa and ongoing remote support. The team undertook stakeholder consultations including with development partners, representatives from relevant government directorates and teachers, and parents and school leaders from primary and secondary schools. The team used the information gathered from the stakeholder consultations in combination with their document analysis to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in Ethiopia's assessment system.

Ethiopia faces a number of systemic challenges in the reinforcement of its learning assessment system, such as a federal education system that makes administering public examinations and the national learning assessment challenging. While Ethiopia currently implements a variety of assessment programs, there are no regional or international programs undertaken. Ethiopia envisages joining a regional and/or international program in the future and fortifying the capacity of the NEAEA. Another future priority includes strengthening the current assessment programs, for example through incorporating the assessment of 21st century skills, ensuring that relevant contextual data is collected and ascertaining that data from these assessments is disseminated and used effectively by relevant stakeholders.

The Ethiopia team's final ANLAS country report will detail challenges such as these and provide recommendations for improvement. The national team plans to use the ANLAS findings to inform their next Education Sector Development Plan.

Vietnam

Vietnam was the second country to launch the ANLAS pilot. The national team was established with representatives from the Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency-Centre of Educational Quality

Evaluation, relevant departments of the Education Ministry, the Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences and the National Academy of Education Management. A Steering Committee representing senior officials from the relevant agencies and departments was also established to provide guidance and support for the implementation of ANLAS, enabling close collaboration between the key stakeholders at every stage, from preparation through analysis to reporting and dissemination.

In February 2019, the stakeholder briefing was held in Hanoi, in collaboration between the national team, the Steering Committee and the GPE Secretariat. ACER then trained the national team and provided support during the data collection and analysis phase. In March 2019 ACER visited Hanoi to participate in some of the piloting activities. Important insights were gained about the active engagement of the national team, the Steering Committee and key stakeholders in the consultative analysis process. School visits were also undertaken to collect information about classroom assessment practices at the school level.

The national team and Steering Group's country report for Vietnam will describe the findings of ANLAS and recommendations for improvement. In recent years, Vietnam has been actively participating in cross-national learning assessment programs both at regional and international levels. The findings from ANLAS can help to identify further aspects to improve the learning assessment system in Vietnam.

Mauritania

The third country to roll out the ANLAS pilot is Mauritania. To facilitate the piloting support for ANLAS in Mauritania in French language, ACER is collaborating with the technical team from PASEC (Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems) of CONFEMEN (Conference of Ministers

of Education in French-Speaking Countries).

The national team in Mauritania was established with representatives from the relevant departments of the Ministry of Education. The stakeholder briefing undertaken by the GPE Secretariat showed high engagement from various key stakeholders including from different Ministry departments, development partners, and representatives from civil society organisations including a teacher union and the national parents' association.

The national team received on-the-ground support from CONFEMEN/PASEC during the training and planning stage, and initial data collection phase. Since the national team consists of relevant key stakeholders in the learning assessment system, the analysis has been highly consultative from the beginning. In addition to focus group discussions, interviews and document analysis, the Mauritania team will undertake a number of school visits to investigate classroom assessment practices. The national team will analyse and evaluate the findings of ANLAS and present important aspects and recommendations for improvement in the country report for Mauritania.

The three piloting countries, various organisations and individuals involved are contributing significantly to the consultative development process of ANLAS. The learnings from the pilot will substantively inform the refinement of the tools and ultimately support countries in building effective learning assessment systems. ■

LINKS

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The role of learning progressions in global scales



Professor Ray Adams is a Director of ACER's Centre for Global Education Monitoring and a Professorial Fellow of the University of Melbourne.

Learning progressions are valuable tools for the international assessment community. **Ray Adams** reports.

Learning progressions are essential tools for understanding students' progress in their learning. In the classroom, learning progressions enable teachers to identify where students are in their learning and convert student assessment results into meaningful descriptions of their learning progress. This understanding is essential for informing next steps in teaching and learning, to ensure that every student is making progress, whatever their ability.

In Australia, the value of learning progressions as a tool for improving teaching and learning has been endorsed in a recent major report, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*. One of the report's key recommendations is the adoption of learning progressions in Australian classrooms, along with real-time monitoring of student progress. If implemented effectively, this will represent a major step forward in enabling Australian teachers to respond to the diverse range of abilities of students in their classes, and thus help them to ensure that all students are progressing in their learning, irrespective of their starting points.

Another advantage of learning progressions is their ability to bring together multiple forms of assessment. Effective education systems use multiple forms of assessment, including teacher judgments and standardised tests. Each of these assessments should be informed by a clear understanding of how students' learning develops in the relevant domain.

Learning progressions provide a clear conceptual framework with which to interpret results from multiple methods of assessment. They also extend understandings of student learning progress beyond the constraints of year-level curriculum or assessment, which is essential when classrooms may contain students whose learning is far above or below year-level standards.

From the classroom to the global assessment community

Just as learning progressions can be used in classrooms to understand the learning progress of diverse students, they could also be used by the international assessment community to understand the progress of learners in diverse countries and reach consistent understandings of that progress across international borders.

The Australian Council for Educational Research Centre for Global Education Monitoring (ACER-GEM) is working to develop a global set of learning progressions for use in reporting against Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education. This complements the substantial program of work led by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML), to develop strategies for monitoring learning against SDG 4. This program of work includes sophisticated statistical strategies for comparing results from different countries using different assessment programs, as well as conceptual strategies to create shared understandings of reading and mathematics — two of the SDG 4 learning domains. ACER-GEM's work on learning progressions will

help bridge the gap between statistical and conceptual approaches, enabling learning assessment data to be translated into meaningful descriptions of student learning.

Learning progressions

ACER-GEM has created learning progressions in reading and mathematics. The progressions comprise numerical scales and descriptions of learning progress, from foundational to more advanced levels. For example, the reading progression describes how reading develops from the capacity to extract meaning from print, or the basic ability to identify sounds in spoken language, through to sophisticated levels of comprehension, such as the interpretation of meaning and reflecting on the form or content of a text. At each level, the learning progressions provide an overall skill description (for the relevant domain and for its composite strands), illustrative examples of how skills and knowledge might be operationalised in assessment, and additional commentary to aid understanding. ■

This article first appeared on Brookings Institution's blog series on learning progressions.

LINKS

<https://www.acer.org/in/gem>

https://research.acer.edu.au/monitoring_learning/32/

<https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sdg-goal-4>

<https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/measuring-learning-comparison-understanding>



A knowledge portal on learning assessments for South Asia

ACER in collaboration with Community Systems Foundation is building a knowledge portal on learning assessments for South Asia. **Sanjay Tripathi** reports.



Sanjay Tripathi is Project Director and Head, Business Development, at ACER India.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 'Quality Education' has re-emphasised that the ultimate goal of education systems is to improve the quality of learning rather than simply ensure access to schools. For developing countries, improvements in the quality of education can drive economic growth. Hanushek & Woessmann in 2007 pointed out that cognitive skills are a strong driver of economic growth, a correlation which is much more robust than the relationship between years of schooling and economic growth. Globally therefore, education programs in both developed and developing countries, are witnessing a strategic shift in focus from inputs to quality of outcomes.

One way to understand the quality of an education system is to measure the learning outcomes of students. Many countries use large-scale standardised international assessments to measure the learning levels of students and diagnose the health of their education systems. Such assessments are a part of the system level monitoring

process and evidence generated is used to address impediments to learning.

In South Asia, it is only recently that countries have shown interest in taking part in international assessments. Bhutan has participated in the new Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for middle and low-income countries, PISA-D, while India has agreed to participate in PISA 2021. Pakistan will participate in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019. Nepal and Afghanistan are implementing an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), and Sri Lanka and the Maldives are integrating some test items from PISA and TIMSS into their national assessments.

Learning assessment community

The *World Development Report 2018* states that almost one-third of those who complete primary school in South Asia lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, hindering the region's growth potential and competitiveness. It points out that even when access to education has increased, improvement in learning levels remains a challenge. Moreover, countries need robust assessment systems that help them to monitor progress in learning and undertake evidence-based corrective measures. A number of countries in South Asia are yet to mainstream systematic monitoring and measurement of learning that enables them to evaluate the impact of their education policies and programs.

In view of these developments, there are strong reasons for establishing regional partnerships in learning assessment in South Asia. Among the key benefits of participating in a regional assessment intervention are regional capacity development, research and knowledge sharing, development of tools and procedures for national and/or cross-national assessments, and collaboration on cross-national assessments and research projects. It is

envisaged that developing a knowledge platform will play a key role in strengthening regional partnerships in the area of learning assessment.

ACER India has collaborated with Community Systems Foundation, USA, to establish a knowledge platform that will support and facilitate knowledge sharing and exchange relevant to developing and implementing learning assessments. The knowledge platform will address the role of assessment in improving teaching and learning in South Asia. Funded by UNICEF, the main purpose of the knowledge platform is to organise existing resources on assessment and foster a community around assessment. It will draw on lessons learnt from other regional initiatives related to learning assessments. The project is limited to aggregation of resources on learning assessments and does not include the development of any new resources and knowledge materials.

Key features

- The platform will become a comprehensive repository of all recent research publications, policies and relevant reports pertaining to learning assessments in South Asia, as well as key international publications and policies.
- It will provide guidance, good practices, tools and resources for each of the phases and key areas of a learning assessment cycle, collating existing materials both from the region and internationally.
- The platform will include data and research findings from learning assessments in South Asia to better monitor the state of learning and quality of education in the region.
- It will include automated visualisation of the evidence through maps and graphs to facilitate different types of analysis, especially analysis related to education equity.
- The portal will organise all content according to a comprehensive taxonomy to enable efficient and powerful search options that

meet the specific needs of different users and target audiences.

- The project will also explore the potential of developing a regional repository of test items using the Testing Assisté par Ordinateur (TAO) platform.

This knowledge platform will be different from existing websites and repositories on assessment in the region as it will include comprehensive and diverse resources on assessment accrued from different sources and linked to specific assessment phases and activities. In addition to publications and reports, the portal will host other resources including assessment data, instruments and tools or software useful for conducting large-scale assessments.

More importantly, the website will include resources, publications and data around assessment specific to South Asia. There are scant resources on learning assessment practices in the region as implementation of national assessments is a relatively new phenomenon. It is expected that the knowledge platform will be able to answer learning assessment related questions for education stakeholders. The initiative will build a knowledge base and trigger dialogue around learning assessment with the final goal of improving the quality of education. ■

LINKS

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/7154> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

<http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>

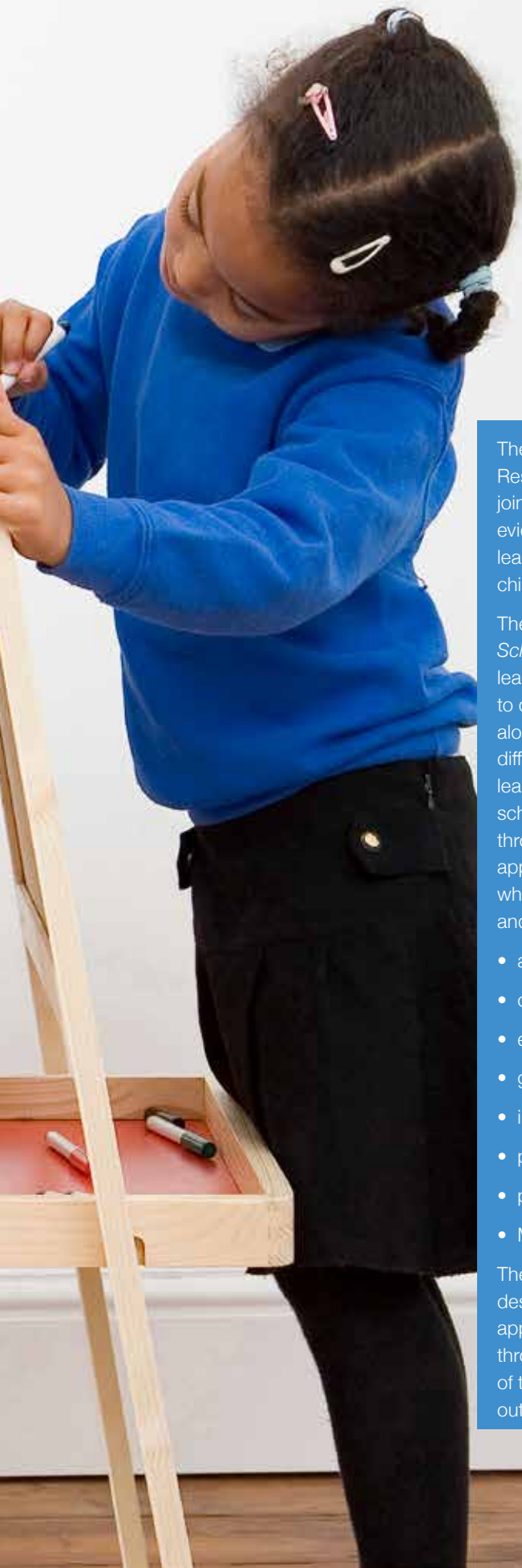


Learning through play in primary school classrooms

New research offers a model for playful learning as an effective pedagogy for primary school-aged children. **Rachel Parker** discusses.



Rachel Parker is a Senior Research Fellow in ACER's Education and Development Research Program.



The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and LEGO Foundation jointly authored a report that provides evidence on the positive impacts of learning through play beyond early childhood.

The study *Learning through Play at School* investigates how play-based learning benefits primary school children to develop a holistic breadth of skills along with academic knowledge. Eight different approaches to teaching and learning commonly used in primary school years were compared to learning through play. Also known as 'integrated approaches', the study explored whether these approaches are playful and effective:

- active learning
- cooperative and collaborative learning
- experiential learning
- guided discovery learning
- inquiry-based learning
- problem-based learning
- project-based learning
- Montessori education

The report, released in March 2019, describes the eight pedagogical approaches as related to learning through play, and provides evidence of their positive impact on learning outcomes.

The study found that there are cross-cutting factors that enable the success of integrated teaching and learning approaches.

Such integrated approaches recognise student agency and support learners to make choices about the content and process of learning.

A range of extant research by LEGO Foundation suggests that play-based learning in early education is impactful when it is joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative and socially interactive.

The study concluded that integrated approaches are effective in promoting learning across social, emotional, physical, creative and cognitive domains in primary school. It suggests that schools can employ integrated pedagogies and extend children's learning gains made from play-based pedagogies in early years.

The Sustainable Development Goals envision quality education as a driver of sustainable development and the key to achieving the Goals. This study on the role of play in education is particularly relevant and timely as a number of education systems around the globe are moving towards child-centric pedagogies to foster holistic learning and expanding learning outcomes to include social, emotional, physical and higher order thinking skills. ■

Read the full report:

Learning through Play at School <https://www.legofoundation.com/en/learn-how/knowledge-base/learning-through-play-at-school/>

LINKS

Read more about *Learning through Play at School*:

<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/how-can-children-learn-through-play-at-school>

<https://rd.acer.org/article/learning-through-play-beyond-the-early-years>

Latest from ACER international offices

ACER works through its international offices to deliver a diverse range of results-oriented projects. They are often implemented in partnership with global and local development partners with the goal to advance education outcomes and improve learning.

ACER INDONESIA

Modelling universal pre-primary education

ACER Indonesia is working on a study of early childhood education in Bogor District, West Java, supported by UNICEF Indonesia and the IKEA Foundation. Under this project, ACER collected data from 620 children aged 5–6 in 20 sub-districts. The study was carried out as a continuation of the baseline study conducted by ACER Indonesia in 2017–18.

Technical trials for introducing ACER assessment tools

ACER Indonesia is getting ready to launch ACER assessments including Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) and International Benchmark Tests (IBT) in Indonesia. A number of technical trials have been conducted in partnership with school associations and local governments. These assessments will be linked to Indonesia's national curriculum.

Encouraging knowledge-sharing on assessments

A series of knowledge sharing sessions and public lectures reaching out to more than 650 people including teachers, university students and lecturers, and education practitioners have been conducted by ACER Indonesia. Expert researchers from across ACER offices delivered these sessions in Indonesia. ACER Indonesia collaborated with government bodies, teacher

associations, school associations, teaching universities and education communities.

ACER INDIA

Strengthening systemic capacity on learning assessment

Supported by UNICEF India, ACER India is conducting a project to strengthen capacity at the state level by building a robust and responsive learning assessment system that yields reliable data to inform educational policy. The project will build capacities of key officials in the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) to implement assessments that gauge progress in learning and generate data for improvements in policy, planning and pedagogical practice. The states covered include Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh.

Reforming learning assessments in Chhattisgarh

Strengthening Learning Assessment Capacities is a new joint project that aims to reform classroom learning by improving assessment and data collection practices. Supported by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Government of Chhattisgarh and UNICEF, the program targets improvement of both classroom

assessments and standardised testing, and teacher workshops are already underway. The project's first phase focuses on the development of standardised instruments for grades 4, 6 and 7 by directly involving teachers in the creation of test items. Phase two concentrates on building the capacity of teachers to initiate the development of high-quality item banks for school-based assessments.

Research grant to analyse IELTS reading strategies

Under a research grant from the British Council, ACER India will analyse the reading strategies of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) takers from linguistically diverse backgrounds in India. A rigorous mixed research methodology will be employed to gather quantitative and qualitative data on the cognitive and metacognitive strategies used by test takers for whom Hindi, Punjabi and Telugu are first languages.

Knowledge platform on learning assessments

ACER India has collaborated with Community Systems Foundation, USA, to establish a South Asian knowledge platform on learning assessments for the UNICEF Regional Office in South Asia (ROSA). The platform will facilitate knowledge sharing on learning assessment and host relevant content to inform teaching and learning.



ACER MALAYSIA

Collaborative partnership to strengthen educational research

In 2018, ACER Malaysia's inaugural year, it formed a collaborative partnership with Emerging Markets Innovative Research (EMIR), a local independent research organisation tasked to provide evidence-based recommendation for policy reform across government agencies. The research collaboration focuses on the evaluation of existing policy and programs and provides recommendations in meeting the targets of the Malaysian Education Blueprint, primarily in three areas – quality and equity of education, bridging the gap in STEM education, and Indigenous education.

Development of high quality item bank

The Ministry of Education (MoE), in line with the aim 'to enculturate Higher Order Thinking Skills' of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, has begun an initiative to build capacity in development of high quality diagnostic assessments across four key domains scientific literacy, mathematical literacy, reading and financial literacy.

It will begin with teacher training on item development followed by creation of an item bank that teachers can use to assess student progress in critical thinking and problem-solving. The Ministry aims to develop high quality items reflecting the style of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). ACER Malaysia, in collaboration with the Performance and Delivery Unit, is providing recommendations to the MoE in preparation for a national teacher training program, as well as quality assurance for the items developed by the Ministry.

ACER UAE

Implementing TIMSS 2019

ACER UAE is implementing the TIMSS 2019 main study for the Ministry of Education (MOE). Internationally, TIMSS is recognised as an effective evidence-based assessment of Grade 4 and 8 students in mathematics and science. Along with Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and PISA, the UAE places TIMSS at the core of its education development goals. The implementation is aligned with the national agenda and the MOE's aim to have the UAE ranked in the top 15 countries for TIMSS by 2021. TIMSS also provides background data that informs policymakers to develop and implement policies that support the improvement of teaching and learning.

Rolling out PISA-based tests for schools

ACER UAE is accredited by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as the national service provider for the PISA for Schools Project. The Ministry of Education appointed ACER UAE to implement the PISA-based tests for schools across the UAE. The schools are encouraged to use the results to support their school improvement effort and benchmark their performance based on the common PISA scale. At the school level, it empowers teachers with student performance data, including data on the background variables unique to each school.

Supporting school improvement in Sharjah

ACER UAE has been awarded a contract for School Improvement Services by the Sharjah Private Education Authority. The program has four components – leadership development, continuous professional

learning for teachers, review of practices within schools to help embed a culture of continuous school improvement and collaboration at all levels within a school using ACER's School Improvement Tool. The Authority is committed to creating an innovative system of review and feedback to schools through the development of a secure online portal.

ACER UK

More than 600 000 SNSA assessments completed

In August 2017, the Scottish Government commissioned ACER to develop and deliver the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) as part of the National Improvement Framework. More than 600 000 assessments have since been completed by children and young people in P1, P4, P7, and S3 year groups. The results provide teachers with objective, comparable diagnostic information about progress, which will help improve outcomes for all children and young people.

Evaluating the impact of teaching assistants

The Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants (MITA) program aims to develop strategies so that teaching assistants can improve student outcomes by working in a whole class setting. RAND Europe has commissioned ACER UK to evaluate the impact of MITA to ensure teaching assistants' resources are appropriately targeted in the classroom and school. ACER's Essential Learning Metrics (ELMs) assessments are used as baseline and outcome measures in the study. The intervention program has been developed by University College London.

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