We are excited to update you on ACER’s work in education for development and inclusive education in this edition of *International Update*. According to UNESCO, some 75 million children are still excluded from education. ACER’s goal of working towards a ‘learning society,’ in which every learner experiences success and has an opportunity to achieve their potential, aligns with international development education goals aimed at addressing this exclusion.

In Zimbabwe, ACER is collaborating with local partners on a UNICEF-funded project aimed at attaining access to a quality education for all, in line with the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015.

ACER’s ‘Social Norms and Equity in Education’ study for UNICEF is exploring the impact of social values on education. The ACER study will examine how social values can reinforce educational exclusion and disparities, as well as developing specific case studies from Asia and Africa.

In September, in conjunction with Plan Australia, ACER held a forum at the State Library of Victoria to engage researchers, practitioners and policy makers in the field of inclusive education in a dialogue about Australian and international experience in regards to literacy and the most marginalised children.

ACER is continuing research activities in the Pacific, with Dr Phil McKenzie leading a research study into financing technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in seven Pacific Island countries. ACER’s TVET study is highlighting how building an effective skills base is an important step in these countries’ efforts in growing their economies.

The update on our assessment work comes to you from India in this edition, with ACER collaborating with the Azim Premji Foundation in building local capacity in assessing students and teacher performance.

We also update you on some of our current projects in capacity building underway throughout Asia, as well as our work through the Education Resource Facility in providing high-quality research and advisory support for AusAID staff based overseas.

Finally, we look forward to introducing the great work involving our team based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on developing a new assessment that tests the level of Arabic of non-native speakers, where previously there was a gap in standardised quality assessments of Arabic at the non-native speaker level in the UAE.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of *International Update*, and welcome your feedback.

Peter McGuckian
Director of International Development, ACER
Strengthening education in Zimbabwe

ACER is conducting an evaluation of the sector-wide Education Transition Fund in Zimbabwe.

ACER has been working on the UNICEF funded Zimbabwe Early Learning Assessment program in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZimSEC) in order to provide educational data for decision making, and to evaluate the impact of the Education Transition Fund.

In 2010 UNICEF and its partners supplied all Zimbabwean schools with resources as part of the multi-donor Education Transition Fund, aimed at attaining quality education and access for all. This was a step towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015.

In 2008 school attendance rates had been as low as 20 per cent. The education sector has since begun to recover, with education being a key part of the new government’s Short Term Emergency Recovery Programme.

ACER Project Director Dr Rachel Outhred said, ‘Schools in Zimbabwe face major challenges. There is a severe shortage of teaching and learning materials and furniture in schools, many teachers need further professional development, and there are a significant number of orphans and vulnerable children.’

In early 2012, a representative sample of approximately 15 000 Year 3 students in almost 500 schools was assessed in literacy and numeracy, and pupil and head teacher surveys
were administered. Results of re-testing over the next three years will be used to identify the extent to which changes are attributable to the Education Transition Fund program interventions.

The study will be able to answer more complex questions than ‘Did the program increase enrolments?’ and ‘Did the program increase the percentage of pupils who can read and write?’

‘We have administered student tests along with questionnaires to collect background data on school and home factors,’ Dr Outhred said.

‘Identifying factors both outside of and within the school that are associated with success, or lack of success, in literacy and numeracy enables us to broaden our understanding of how educational exclusion takes place, and answer complex questions like “Who is the system working for and who is it not working for?”

‘Sector-wide evaluations that measure impact over several years are rare in low-income countries, given the constraints of resources and the length of funding cycles in the development sector. The results of the study will not only provide educational data to inform decision making at a crucial time in Zimbabwe, but also provide evidence regarding the impact of sector-wide approaches in low-income countries,’ Dr Outhred said.

Through the project, ACER will help to build staff capacity in the local education system by providing training in assessment to senior ZimSEC staff.
International assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study make the headlines. So do national assessments like the National Achievement Survey in India, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy in Australia and the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the United States.

The focus in international and national assessments is on enabling system monitoring and improvement over time, but how might educators best go about developing assessments that help improve teaching and learning at a more local level? That’s a question being asked by staff at the Azim Premji Foundation (APF), a not-for-profit organisation working with teachers and educational leaders to achieve quality universal education in India. The answer? By building capacity in the area of testing and test development for assessing students and teachers.

That’s what ACER and the APF have been doing since 2008 through collaborative programs and initiatives. ACER and the APF share the same goal: to apply international best practices in educational research and development to support school improvement and learning outcomes.

Following up on a workshop by ACER Senior Research Fellow Ms Prue Anderson and a visit by APF staff to ACER in Melbourne, Principal Research Fellow Dr Annie Brown and Research Fellow Ms Helen Lye from ACER’s Assessment and Reporting research programs in the last year have been working in Bangalore with staff from the APF’s Institute for Assessment and Accreditation and APF field officers. The focus of their work is on developing and analysing student assessments across a range of subjects as part of an ongoing program to support the APF’s assessment work. Dr Brown and Ms Lye’s work has included a 10-day workshop for 30 field officers and staff from the Institute for Assessment and Accreditation.

‘The aim of our 10-day workshop was capacity building in the area of testing and tool development for assessing students and teachers,’ explains Dr Brown. ‘The objective of the workshop was to equip participants to design standardised tools for student and teacher assessments.’
Workshopping assessment in Bangalore

ACER’s workshop with APF staff addressed basic assessment concepts like validity and reliability; interpreting test scores; norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests; the development of assessment frameworks and blueprints; item writing, item facility, item discrimination and distractor analysis; developing stimulus materials, open-ended questions and scoring criteria, essay prompts, assessment rubrics, marker training and moderation; and the rationale for and process of panelling. This was followed by sessions with a focus on literacy, numeracy and science assessment.

All the participants were subject specialists in one of the primary school subjects, or in teacher education. Those in the teacher education field were in the process of developing a teacher competency framework on which they intended to develop an assessment, for use with teacher trainees undertaking education in their newly established Azim Premji University. The university, which was formally opened while the workshops were underway, specialises exclusively in teacher education.

‘We designed the workshop to lead into a small-scale test development project,’ said Dr Brown. ‘The participants worked in subject groups to develop a test construct and blueprint, followed by test items for the subject area they were interested in. These were English, science, environmental science, maths, and student responsibility. They then panelled items and produced final versions of the tests. We then piloted them on students in a nearby school and finished off with data entry and item analysis – so we worked through the whole cycle.’

What is the APF?

The APF, founded in 2001 by Azim Premji, a business leader and chairman of Indian software giant Wipro, seeks to implement scalable ‘proof of concept’ reforms that can be adopted by education systems. Its focus over the last decade or so has been on primary education, partnering with governments in 13 states across India to pilot initiatives in more than 20,000 schools that have the potential for systemic reform.

Besides school-based initiatives, though, the APF has increasingly turned its attention to initial and ongoing teacher education and professional development for school leaders through the APF Institute for Learning and Development, the Institute for Assessment and Accreditation and the Azim Premji University, founded after passage of the Azim Premji University Act of 2010 in the state of Karnataka.

The Institute for Assessment and Accreditation is a critical component of the APF’s work to spread awareness of, and create demand for, assessment-driven quality improvements in education.
Financing TVET in the Pacific

A new ACER research study aims to produce a comprehensive empirical analysis of the existing systems for financing technical and vocational education and training in seven Pacific Island countries.

The study – of Vanuatu, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga and Fiji – has been commissioned by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), and is being conducted by ACER in association with Austraining International and leading consultants.

As well as producing case studies of the seven countries, the project will identify technical and vocational education and training (TVET) financing issues across the region, and identify options to make future financing more efficient and effective at both national and regional levels.

Project director and ACER Teaching, Learning and Transitions Research Director, Dr Phil McKenzie, explained that effective TVET systems are essential for developing the skill base that countries need to advance their economies; and building and maintaining these systems requires an investment by governments, employers, individuals, and external agencies.

‘In order to maximise the returns it is important that this investment in skills is effective and efficient,’ said Dr McKenzie. ‘Collecting and analysing financial information is an important component of management and accountability arrangements.’

At present, Pacific Island countries generally have only limited capacity to collect and analyse financial and
other data on TVET provision. The development locally of skills needed to do this, and local capacity to research and report on policy implications, are therefore an important aspect of the study.

According to Dr McKenzie, the scale and maturity of the TVET systems, and the structures, finances and resources that support them, reflect the diversity in the economic and social circumstances of the seven Pacific Island countries.

'It is critical to understand the funding mechanisms and resource allocation models, which are currently being used in the seven national TVET systems,' Dr McKenzie said. 'For example, the manner in which TVET budget preparations are approached from an intra-governmental perspective will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the robustness of the financial and procurement management systems for providing TVET.'

At the national level, the logistical issues faced among the seven Pacific Island countries in terms of transport, communications and information technology often combine with factors such as scale, remoteness and resource inadequacies to become significant barriers to TVET delivery and graduate employability. Each of these factors can influence the role and positioning of TVET in training individuals and interacting with the labour market and, in turn, how the TVET system is financed and resourced.

By working closely with the seven countries concerned, the study aims to help inform decision-making about key policy issues, such as what forms of TVET can be provided efficiently domestically, and what forms are better sourced by distance education mode or by sending students overseas.

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**Research into funding and resource allocation**

Collecting and analysing financial information bears directly on policy development relating to funding models. Key research questions examine who should pay for training and in what proportions, institutional arrangements, governance structures, and tailoring training programs to meet the needs of specific groups, such as new entrants to the workforce and the disadvantaged.

To address funding mechanisms and resource allocation as well as logistical issues, the research will work with local TVET stakeholders and researchers to:

- identify current public and private sources of capital and recurrent funding for TVET and relevant expenditure from each source;
- identify where expenditure is directed, taking account of participation from a gender perspective and the associated distribution mechanisms;
- identify TVET outcomes provided for funds allocated, including a comparison of the costs of TVET training between different types of providers, fields and levels of training, duration, mode of delivery, and geographic location; and
- assess strengths and weaknesses in different contexts of different financing mechanisms used; as well as financing mechanisms that are more likely to ensure financially sustainable national TVET systems.

The study is scheduled to run from April 2012 to March 2014, and the seven countries will be involved over two stages. Stage One fieldwork is taking place in 2012 in Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. Stage Two fieldwork will occur in 2013 in Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and again in Papua New Guinea.

The research is built on ongoing TVET stakeholder engagement, and on contributing to local capacity.
Literacy and mathematics testing in Tonga

An ACER analysis of literacy and mathematics test results in Tonga is informing future test construction and item development to improve their overall quality.

The research undertaken by ACER Systemwide Testing Research Director, Mr Chris Freeman, is the result of a request by the Tonga Post of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) to investigate assessment data from Tonga in association with the Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific. The analysis centred on two broad areas.

Firstly, it examined what the tests uncover about student learning. It did this by identifying areas where students perform most poorly and analysing whether poor performance is associated with lack of subject knowledge and conceptual understanding, or with the language used in those test items.

Secondly, it examined the teaching and learning processes in classrooms which appear to be associated with better performance on the tests, as well as the kinds of teacher and school support required to bring about changes in learning outcomes.

A further purpose of the research was to demonstrate the types of analyses that can be performed on student data, and the power of the data in providing diagnostic feedback and better quality reports to the relevant stakeholders.

According to Mr Freeman, any conclusions drawn from the analysis should be treated with caution.

‘Since the data provided were neither from a full Tongan cohort nor a systematic random sample of the population it’s not possible to draw inferences about the Tongan Grade 4 population,’ Mr Freeman noted.

‘Mindful of that, the analysis shows there appears currently to be a mismatch between the level of difficulty of the Tongan literacy and mathematics tests and the performance of the sample attempting the tests.’

As AusAID’s demographic and development statistics for Tonga indicate, the island nation has already made significant progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in terms of the goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015. Tonga has a net enrolment rate in primary school education of 93 per cent and an adult literacy rate of 99 per cent.1

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ACER staff in Australia and the United Arab Emirates are collaborating on a new assessment that will help international schools meet the needs of students who are non-native speakers of Arabic.

Pioneered by Ms Bernadette Brouwers, Project Director in ACER's Assessment Services division, the Measuring Arabic Language Competency (MALC) test will assess the student achievement of non-native speakers of Arabic.

According to Mr Alan Egbert, Manager of ACER's United Arab Emirates (UAE) office, the new assessment meets the needs of international schools that offer Arabic for non-native speakers by providing expert scoring and analysis of results.

As UAE Project Manager Ms Sameeksha Narula explained, ‘The MALC assessment, initially for students in Grades 5 and 7, will provide schools with a tool to identify student achievement and assist them in placing students in beginner, intermediate or advanced language classes for non-native speakers. The test addresses reading and comprehension, grammar and the like.’

All non-Arabic speakers in the UAE are required to study Arabic until at least Grade 10, but, as UAE Senior Project Officer Ms Amrita Broca explained, there is currently no mandated language curriculum for non-native speakers of Arabic and no requirement that non-native speakers undertake an Arabic language examination.

‘While the MALC assessment is an achievement test, it also addresses the need for certification,’ Ms Broca said. ‘We’ve worked closely with schools in the UAE to identify their needs. Feedback from schools, particularly in terms of the International Benchmark Tests, ACER’s internationally administered program of assessments in English, mathematics and science, indicated a clear need for a quality assessment of Arabic for non-native speakers. We’ve worked closely with Ms Brouwers and ACER’s test item developers who are building the assessment.

‘Developing a test like the MALC assessment depends on significant collaboration across ACER to create a tool that’s fit for purpose,’ said Ms Narula.

‘Ms Brouwers and Principal Research Fellow Dr Annie Brown also saw the need to conduct school visits, which Dr Brown undertook with us. Our work with international schools showed a clear need for an achievement test that supported teachers’ judgements about placing non-native speakers of Arabic into classes at the appropriate beginner, intermediate or advanced level.’

As UAE Project Officer Ms Noha el Zayat explained, those school visits also provided an opportunity to collect resource material, which Ms Brouwers and the item writing team have been able to use to develop items.

Following a pilot in November 2012, the MALC assessment will be rolled out across international schools in the UAE, with Qatar, Saudi, Bahrain and Oman to follow.
Research and evidence: Supporting international development
ACER is supporting the Australian Agency for International Development, better known as AusAID, through the Education Resource Facility.

ACER’s growing work on the Education Resource Facility (ERF) to support Australia’s overseas aid effort is occurring in both the delivery of help-desk research and analysis, and through the delivery of learning and development short courses, literature reviews, issues papers, workshops and seminars. The ERF is managed by GRM International, in partnership with ACER and CfBT Education Trust.

According to AusAID’s Helping the World’s Poor through Effective Aid: Australia’s comprehensive aid policy framework to 2015-16, AusAID’s primary purpose is to help people overcome poverty – particularly through aid for education, which is the flagship of AusAID’s aid program. The ERF team supports that aid program. The

To achieve AusAID’s key education targets for 2012-13 to 2015-16, Australia’s investment in education for 2012-13 is expected to be $980 million – about 20 per cent of Australia’s total official development assistance and a 16 per cent increase over the 2011-12 investment in education. The amount Australia will spend on education from 2011-13 to 2015-16 is expected to be around $5 billion.

While achieving AusAID’s key education targets is contingent on funding, it also depends on high-quality research and advisory support for staff in AusAID’s overseas posts and in Canberra. ACER is providing this high-quality research and advisory support in two ways through the ERF. First, ACER manages the ERF help-desk, providing rapid and reliable responses to requests for research and advisory support from staff in AusAID’s overseas posts and in Canberra. Second, ACER’s large pool of highly qualified education experts provides longer-term learning and development research and advice for AusAID on its strategic and policy priorities for education.

Those priorities are basic education for what AusAID calls ‘hard case’ out-of-school children and youth; improved quality of learning; and strengthened education policy and systems for better service delivery.

ACER’s research and advisory support for projects and programs addressing those priorities has included literature reviews addressing language issues in education in Nepal, social protection in the Pacific region, gender mainstreaming in education services and education management information systems in Papua New Guinea, analyses of assessment data on literacy and mathematics in Tonga and technical assistance on national assessments in the Solomon Islands.

**At a glance: Key AusAID education targets 2012-13 to 2015-16**

- Four million more boys and girls will be enrolled in school with 24,000 classrooms built or upgraded and 1.2 million students provided with financial or nutritional support.
- 190,000 teachers and 300,000 school officials will be trained and 12 million textbooks provided, contributing to 20 million boys and girls obtaining a better quality education.
- More than 100,000 people will be provided with disability services and more than 500,000 boys and girls will attend schools that are more accessible to children with disabilities.
- At least 17,000 people – half or more of them women – will be awarded tertiary scholarships to study overseas and return home to assist economic development in their country.

ACER is working with the World Bank on capacity building projects in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In Punjab, Pakistan, ACER is undertaking a capacity review of the Punjab Examination Commission (PEC) and the Punjab Education Assessment System (PEAS). The review by ACER Principal Research Fellow, Dr Gabrielle Matters, and ACER Psychometrics and Methodology Research Director, Dr Siek Toon Khoo, is addressing the assessment environment in Punjab, the technical quality of existing assessment practice and the alignment of assessment with aspects of the system like curriculum, textbooks and teacher training.

Drs Matters and Khoo have so far undertaken desk reviews and in-country assessments of the capacities and technical requirements of PEC and PEAS to deliver quality assessment programs and associated reports. They have provided recommendations for the design of a program to strengthen the capacity of PEC and PEAS to deliver the assessment programs and the processes by which they deliver them.

In the final report, Drs Khoo and Matters have identified a number of strengths in the present situation, as well as areas for capacity development. Pakistan faces significant challenges in education, especially for girls, but is committed to improvement. According to figures from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Pakistan has a low adult literacy rate of around 55 per cent, poor gender equity standards and low high school enrolment figures – only 29 per cent of girls and 38 per cent of boys were in secondary school in 2010 according to the UIS1.

In Bangladesh, ACER is assisting the Bangladeshi Ministry of Education on the Building the Bangladesh National Assessment for Secondary and Higher Secondary Education capacity building project.

ACER Systemwide Testing Research Director, Mr Chris Freeman, and ACER Principal Research Fellow, Ms Jocelyn Cook, are undertaking the analyses and providing in-country analysis workshops as well as reports to inform curriculum and learning, and item construction workshops.

Their work addresses technical aspects and sampling design for a mathematics assessment in 2011-12 in a sample of schools, followed in 2012-13 by English and science assessments in 2013-14, before returning to maths – somewhat like the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) cycle, except on a year-based cycle rather than the PISA three-year cycle.

1UIS Statistics in Brief: Education (all levels) profile – Pakistan. Available at http://stats.uis.unesco.org

**Fast facts**

- AusAID will devote an estimated $82.1 million to its Pakistan country program in 2012-2013.
- In partnership with UNICEF and the Asian Development Bank, Australia has supported the construction of 511 transitional and permanent schools for more than 40,000 children following Pakistan’s 2005 earthquake.
- AusAID will devote an estimated $77.1 million to its Bangladesh country program in 2012-2013.
- Bangladesh has experienced strong and steady economic growth since 1990 and has seen improvements in a range of social indicators, including education, although despite its declining poverty rates it still remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

AusAID Official Development Assistance for Pakistan and Bangladesh.
Supporting education in Pakistan and Bangladesh

ACER supports Australia’s humanitarian and development objectives in line with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, such as Goal Two, to achieve universal primary education, and Goal Three, to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education.

AusAID’s current partners in supporting programs to achieve these goals in Pakistan include United Nations agencies, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development and the Aga Khan Foundation. In 2009-10, Australia provided 1.56 million children in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province with free textbooks and more than 145,000 girls with stipends, enabling them to attend school.

In Bangladesh, AusAID has helped one million children to complete primary education and more than 590,000 children to complete pre-primary education, in partnership with Bangladesh non-government organisation BRAC.
ACER’s international educational monitoring is helping to develop a learning society, where the language of instruction in classrooms may be Spanish, Basque or English – or all three.

ACER is working with local partners in Spain on a longitudinal study in the northern Spanish region of Euskadi (or Basque Country) to compare the reading, maths and science achievement of students in bilingual and trilingual classes.

With partners Grupo Medida y Evaluación de Sistemas Educativos at the Complutense University of Madrid and the European Foundation Society and Education, ACER has been tracking two cohorts of students who were in Grades 4 and 7 in 2011. The three-year study will compare student achievement in schools with bilingual instruction in Spanish and Basque, and trilingual instruction in Spanish, Basque and English.

As Dr Tom Lumley, a Senior Research Fellow in ACER’s Assessment and Reporting research program explained, ‘ACER is providing the tests, drawing on test items from the Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) for mathematics, science and reading, and the International Benchmark Tests (IBT) in English, maths and science.’

While Dr Lumley has a background in second language assessment and applied linguistics, his second languages background is, in his words, also ‘incredibly helpful.’

‘My languages – Spanish and French, mainly, but also a certain amount of Arabic, German, Portuguese and Italian – come in useful in many projects. Working for six years with verifiers on the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) gave me a lot more useful experience,’ Dr Lumley said.

When Dr Lumley and his colleagues translate and verify items for the Basque Country longitudinal study, as for other second language assessments, they draw on the expertise of external professional translators. For the mathematics and science components, they begin with items in English that have to be translated into both Spanish and Basque. To enable results to be comparable across languages, it is essential that the Spanish and Basque tests are equivalent to the original English test and to each other.

The third year of the study, in 2013, will also draw on test items from the International Schools’ Assessment (ISA), which will allow the PAT and IBT results to be broadly aligned with the ISA scale. Modelled on PISA, using the ISA scale enables linking of the outcomes in this study to PISA results.

The goal, Dr Lumley explained, is to learn more about the impact of the language of instruction on student achievement.
A roundtable forum hosted by ACER this month brought together researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in the field of inclusive education.

The roundtable speakers at the forum discussed how inclusive literacy interventions in the Australian and international development arenas can support the most marginalised children.

Drawing on extensive experience in both the Australian and international development arenas, roundtable members who are highly regarded in the field re-examined concepts, assumptions and agendas in inclusive education, as well as identifying key issues and challenges shared at the domestic level and in a developing country context.

In creating an inaugural platform for technical consultations on major issues in inclusive literacy, the forum provided an opportunity to hear from experts with a broad and country-specific knowledge, and an opportunity to learn about different approaches in developing solutions, since an effective approach in one context may not necessarily transfer into another.

Scheduled presenters on childhood development and literacy included Professor Veronica McKay, Deputy Executive Dean of the College of Education at the University of South Africa, on the development of a South African school workbook project that provides ‘lesson-a-day’ learning materials in all official languages for around six million children from Grade R (or ‘reception year’) to Grade 9.

Professor Emeritus Merv Hyde, Academic Director of the International Projects Group at the University of the Sunshine Coast, discussed research from Indonesian Papua that examines how teachers engage with local communities. The roundtable also included speakers from the University of Melbourne, Catholic Education, Plan Australia and ACER.

The forum was hosted in conjunction with children’s development organisation Plan Australia at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia.
Social norms and equity in education
ACER is conducting a study for UNICEF to explore how social norms operate in and through education.

As part of the Millennium Development Goals, governments of UN countries have pledged that by 2015 children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and that gender disparity should be eliminated in education. However, there are currently an estimated 67 million primary school aged children who are not in school. Of these children, 45 per cent live in sub-Saharan Africa and another 24 per cent in South and West Asia.

ACER is conducting a review of existing analytical frameworks and empirical research on social norms and equity in education, followed by case studies in Liberia, Nepal and Kenya. These will inform a conceptual framework and recommended program strategy for UNICEF.

ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Rachel Outhred said, ‘The review and case studies will look at how social norms can reinforce exclusion and disparities, and also how they can have a positive impact on inclusion and equity.

‘We will be able to identify what works in terms of effective programs that challenge prejudicial social norms. We can also recommend strategies that enhance social norms that promote inclusion in education.

‘An example of a prejudicial social norm that impacts negatively on the educational outcomes for certain groups, is the norm for adults to remain silent when they witness sexual violence in the school,’ Dr Outhred said.

The project team has made a number of interesting initial findings, which included a review of the publicly available data regarding the impact of discriminatory social institutions on outcomes for women.

In examining the relationship between the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) and the United Nations Development Program’s Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 99 countries, the team compared the impact of discriminatory social institutions on outcomes for women.

The analysis showed a moderately strong relationship between the SIGI and the GII, as well as a fairly clear connection between discriminatory social institutions and outcomes for women. As the intensity of discriminatory practices against women increases, so the outcomes for women (compared with those of men) worsen.

The absolute and the relative position of the women in each country was also considered. Women in many countries are in especially discriminatory settings because in absolute terms they are worst off, and in relative terms they are worse than would be expected.

Underlying discrimination against women appears often to be associated with specific regions; for example women in West African nations tend to be worse off in both absolute and relative terms. In contrast, women in Central Asia and Eastern Europe tend to have better outcomes than would be expected, given the extent of underlying discrimination. This more detailed examination of the data was undertaken by breaking it down into United Nations standard geographical regions, which showed this strong clustering effect.

ACER will collaborate with a range of stakeholders to frame the research questions, with staff travelling to country offices in Nepal, Liberia, Kenya and Ethiopia to work with local staff on the case studies in 2012.

‘The in-country case studies will involve UNICEF country office staff and relevant local institutions to identify, develop, analyse and finalise the case studies,’ Dr Outhred said.

Using this information, ACER will design a program strategy that highlights good practice and areas for improvement, providing suggestions on how lessons and strategies can be applied and adapted in a variety of settings.

Recommended strategies are intended to inform UNICEF’s policies and frameworks at a policy level, yet also need to be adaptable at the local level. This will take place through UNICEF’s established organisational structure, through the New York headquarters, regional and country offices, and through field staff. The findings will be presented to UNICEF in New York by the project co-directors, Dr Rachel Outhred and Ms Leila Ismail.
The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is one of the world’s leading educational research centres. Its mission is to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services to improve learning across the lifespan.

ACER was established in 1930 and for more than 80 years has built a strong reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policy makers and professional practitioners. 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 340 staff located in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Dubai and New Delhi.

ACER works in an increasingly international context, providing support through consultancies and professional development programs to several countries by establishing national assessment programs, undertaking commissioned research and providing assessment services to a broad range of international clients.

- International projects include professional development programs for ministries of education and institutions throughout the world and through agencies such as Australia’s overseas aid program (AusAID) and the World Bank. ACER has undertaken a broad range of consultancy work to support aid-funded projects.
- ACER led a consortium of research organisations that manages the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) project to assess the mathematical, scientific and reading literacy skills of 15-year-olds in more than 60 countries.
- A number of ACER’s assessment services have been adapted or specially developed for international clients, such as the International Schools Assessment (ISA) developed by ACER researchers to measure the reading, mathematical literacy and writing achievement of students in Years 3 to 10 in international schools worldwide.