

DFAT – New International Development Policy

ACER submission DRAFT

Transforming Education Systems – for peace, stability, and prosperity in our region

The Australian Council for Educational Research is one of the world's leading education research centres. As an independent, not-for-profit organisation, our work supports SDG 4, which calls on countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunity for all. ACER is an official partner of the United Nations Educational, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO).

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has highlighted four focus areas including effective states, state and community resilience, partnerships with Australia and collective action on global challenges in the new draft International Development Policy. ACER recognises that *education is central* to the success of each of these objectives as it provides the foundations from which to build a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

1. What key trends or challenges will shape Australia's engagement in our region and globally over the next five to 10 years? What risks and opportunities does this present for Australia's development assistance?

Education is key for sustained development and ensuring peace, stability and prosperity and is the main driver in addressing the social and political vulnerabilities of the Indo-Pacific region. However, the world is facing a learning crisis, which is compounded by climate change, economic shocks, technology advances, natural disasters and health crises. To meet these challenges, *it is critical to build more resilient education systems*. Australia is in a unique geopolitical position, backed by world leading expertise, to respond to these challenges. This means a focus on transforming education systems and building a knowledge base that effectively equips people to respond to such challenges and prepare people for their futures is essential (see for example [WB Education Strategy, Learning for All, 2020](#); [ACER's Strategic Plan](#)).

ACER's research has shown that even before the pandemic, children were not meeting minimum levels of learning across the Indo-Pacific region. The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019 study showed only 50 per cent of children in 2 of the 6 participating countries met grade level expectations at the end of primary school for reading. In one of these countries, this fell to only 2 per cent. The Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) 2021, found that across 15 countries, 1 in 2 children were not performing at expected levels for reading, and 1 in 3 for mathematics. In the conflict-affected parts of our region, such as in Southern Philippines, the situation is even more critical, with almost 9 in every 10 children not meeting minimum learning expectations for Grade 3.

The COVID-19 pandemic which caused unprecedented learning disruptions for 1.6 billion children worldwide, has exacerbated the learning gap for the world's most vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Our research has shown a decline in the mental health of students,

teachers and families, increasing rates of student absenteeism; and potentially lowering future earnings for students. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) estimates that even before the pandemic, there were more than **31 million children out of school across Southeast Asia and the Pacific**. School closures and remote instruction has been a primary driver of widening achievement gaps due to inequality. The risk in all these contexts is that young people may never complete formal education, and that already disadvantaged children will fall further and further behind, potentially impacting long-term economic and political stability across our region.

The COVID-19 experience has provided Australia with the knowledge to address the underlying challenges of learning inequality and [build more agile and resilient education systems](#). The evidence shows that we need to shift our attention to areas that promote educational improvement. We need to: understand learning gaps and support students at their point of need to further learning growth; measure learning progress and monitor outcomes against global indicators and standards; focus on foundational learning to lift the multiple barriers to starting school, especially for disadvantaged children affected by poverty, conflict or ethnicity; recognise and support the health and wellbeing of children and teachers; and build and strengthen our partnerships with multi-lateral institutions, civil society organisations, the private sector, and other donors in the Indo-Pacific region, to enable systematic and long-term change. ***Addressing the learning crisis in our region, is key to building and ensuring economic, social and political stability and peace.***

2. What development capabilities will Australia need to respond to these challenges? And
3. How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?

The educational challenges in our region are significant. Australia is well positioned with its existing expertise and development capabilities to leverage long-term sustainable change in the education sector. In turn, the benefits of quality education will have a flow-on impact on regional prosperity and stability. Australia's capabilities are characterised by our existing strong regional partnerships with multilateral organisations, governments, donors, civil society and the private sector. We also have world leading technical expertise in the education sector and internationally recognised educational institutions.

Transforming education systems relies on the use of high-quality, accessible, timely and reliable data to inform decision-making (UN General Assembly, 2015). ***The Indo-Pacific region faces major challenges regarding equity in education.*** Yet many country programs are unable to produce or draw on relevant data to assess the effectiveness of education interventions to improve learning outcomes. Countries often rely on weak or inconsistent national assessments. More work is needed to improve data quality so that governments can use their national assessments to identify gaps in learning and how these gaps can be addressed. Notable progress in our region is recognised, with advancements in SEA-PLM and PILNA initiatives. Australia has a key role to advocate for partner governments to sign up and continue their involvement in these regional assessments. Australia has some of the world's leading experts in the field of educational research and monitoring, and capitalising on this expertise lies at the centre of addressing the learning crisis in our region.

Exchange of international skills and sharing of intellectual leadership provides the foundations for long-term economic and political growth in our region. Australia's ability to identify and understand challenges from the perspective of our regional partners is achieved best through exchange and partnership. Existing programs, including scholarships for development, organisational links between universities, government and civil society, and regional cooperation in improving teaching and learning in schools are all critical to this. By continuing to build these partnerships through strengthened emphasis on human capital development and knowledge sharing, Australia will be better able to help in identifying and addressing vulnerabilities.

4. How should the new policy reflect the Government's commitments to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality? approach

The new DFAT policy provides an opportunity for Australia to promote a new vision for education investments and regional engagement by focusing on how we engage with our partners and the way in which our investment strategies are established. Australia has led the way in establishing dynamic and responsive collaboration in the Pacific, providing opportunities to comprehensively address long-term educational challenges. DFAT's education investment in the Pacific through the ACER-EQAP technical partnership is an example of how multi-stakeholder partnerships can create a shared sense of ownership, results and responsibility, and is an exemplar case of a more innovative approach to traditional donor-recipient models.

Our region is characterised by strong education structures and commitment for change, as represented through the Forum for Education Minister Meeting (FEEdMM's) Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) and the SEAMEO Strategic Plan (2021-2030). DFAT is in a unique position to bring partner governments, multilateral organisations and regional networks, such as the NEQMAP, together and to influence our regional entities. For the size of the Australian aid program, an increased focus on existing regional architecture will be important.

Strong partnerships and networks with existing regional and international structures such as the Pacific Community (SPC), Southeast Asian Ministers of Education (SEAMEO) and Network for Quality Monitoring Assessment Program (NEQMAP), provide Australia with considerable influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The quality and trust in Australia's engagement and partnership approaches to development make it well placed to work with regional governments to find solutions. Australia has existing close ties to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the political trust of our partners to provide countries a common platform for equal engagement as they work through the challenges of implementing their education recovery plans. Continuing to build and expand DFAT's thematic expertise in the education sector will provide a sustainable platform to continue to engage with these important partners.

5. What lessons from Australia's past development efforts should inform the policy? What is Australia seen to be doing comparatively well?

The way Australia engages with education partners in the region is the most important thing for driving long-term educational change. An example of where Australia's past development efforts has been particularly successful is through the development of the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy which acknowledges the importance of shared resources and the commitment by Pacific nations governments and Australia to work together to advance Pacific regionalism. Australia's aid policy should reflect this approach to collaboration and consultation in the education sector and extend this into Southeast Asia.

Australia is making a significant global contribution to the Education 2030 Agenda by working with international partners to develop methods and tools that enable countries, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, to monitor progress against SDG 4. Continuation of this work is needed to ensure we meet the global education goals by 2030.

Australia has strong political connections in the education sector in the Indo-Pacific region. It has successfully demonstrated its strengths of working with governments, the private sector and civil society in the education sector and has created space to support partner institutes and build capacity for policy reform. DFAT's Office of Development Assistance provide the foundations from which the connection between evidence, policy and programming can take effect ([ODE, 2013 Lessons from Australia's Aid](#)). The new policy should draw on these experiences and effectively engage with policy leaders to measure program outcomes and benchmark results against SDG 4 to address underlying issues of education inequity.

Long-term and consistent investment is needed to improve learning. It is not just about the size of the investment, but also about building joint financial commitment and ownership of results. The example of the EQAP financing model for education is changing the way we think about education aid programming, demonstrating new and innovative ways of developing long-term financial investment strategies. Additionally, Australian aid is recognised by development partners as being responsive and flexible in ways that other aid programs are not. This means Australia is comparatively well placed to respond to priorities, changes and opportunities more quickly and effectively than other investment partners. However, competing financial priorities exacerbated by the economic impact of the pandemic, means that the funding gap in education has widened substantially ([McKinsey, 2021](#)), and DFAT funding to education is expected to drop in 2022/23 budget estimates. ([DFAT Education Development Cooperation Factsheet, 2022](#)). Addressing this trend is necessary to maintain an ongoing impact on education and in turn, regional stability and prosperity.

6. How should the performance and delivery systems be designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning in Australia's development assistance?

The effectiveness of Australia's development assistance in education will benefit from **investing in education capacity**, for example in education specialists or long-term partnerships with educational institutions. Building capacity to understand what works in schools and education systems, and encouraging dialogue between trained practitioners, researchers, governments and other stakeholders should be part of this investment strategy.

Adopting an approach of working side-by-side with government partners, through national structures and people, is central to any capacity support initiative.

Transparency and accountability must be improved by setting targets and indicators that are related to *improving learning* – this means moving beyond access to schooling to address the question of quality. Global evidence suggests that while access to schooling has increased rapidly, learning has not ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). COVID-19 has raised new challenges and opportunities for learning continuity which means *we must extend the concepts of quality to adaptive and resilient learning systems*.

Quality programming that cuts through political agendas and promotes transparency and accountability must be driven by quality evidence and changes informed by program results. To build quality programming, we must focus on collecting data over time through the integration of inbuilt assessments of learning outcomes at the program design and evaluation stages of implementation. DFAT's investments in the multi-country teacher evaluation studies, the EQAP regional partnership and the Innovation for Indonesia's School Children (INOVASI) program demonstrate how collecting quality evidence throughout the program cycle can contribute to transforming education systems.

At the centre of any quality education program is the focus on learning, but this is only possible if policy makers and practitioners collect and have access to reliable, timely and relevant student, teacher, school and system level education data. Building internal accountability systems like an educational management information system and learning assessments or participating in regional initiatives (such as PILNA or SEA-PLM) that can measure system level progress against the SDGs is key.

Education reform takes time and expectations for results must be aligned with a long-term vision. Responsive, adaptive programming in the education sector is key, which means investments must be flexible enough to change and improve as needed.