

# ACCELERATING CHANGE FOR CHILDREN'S AND YOUTHS' EDUCATION THROUGH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING (ACCESS)

A reflection on key findings from Phase 1

Dr. Ritesh Shah and Kayla Boisvert



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## What is ACCESS?

Accelerating Change for Children's and Youths' Education for Systems Strengthening (ACCESS) is a 4-year research partnership between the University of Auckland, the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG)<sup>1</sup>, and Dubai Cares<sup>2</sup>.

### ACCESS Objectives

1. Understand the wider political economy of provision, regulation, and funding of Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) within national education systems
2. Establish a platform to bring together key stakeholders to work to address challenges for better institutionalisation of AEPs

## What did we do in ACCESS Phase 1?

From **March 2021 to March 2022**, a team of six ACCESS researchers explored the gaps and opportunities for Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) to meet the needs of overage out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) in five countries—Colombia, Jordan, Nigeria, Pakistan and Uganda. They spoke with key government officials, donors, implementing partners, UN agencies, civil society organisations, and others to understand:

- The need and demand for AEPs and/or other nonformal education [NFE] options
- What programmes currently exist to meet those needs
- How/by whom are AEPs funded, regulated, and implemented
- The degree to which AEPs meet learners' and community needs in terms of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability<sup>3</sup>
- Opportunities and challenges for AEPs to be better institutionalised<sup>4</sup> and offered at scale within national education systems

<sup>1</sup> The Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG) is a global-level interagency working group comprised of education partners supporting accelerated education provision globally. The AEWG is part of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) whose current members include UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, NRC, Plan, IRC, Save the Children, Education Development Centre, ECHO, and War Child Holland.

<sup>2</sup> ACCESS has been generously supported by Dubai Cares under the Evidence for Education in Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Fund. Dubai Cares is a UAE-based global philanthropic organisation that works towards providing children and youth in developing countries with access to quality education. Since its inception in 2007, the organisation has successfully launched education programmes reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries. Dubai Cares also plays a key role in helping achieve the UN SDG4 on quality education. To learn more, please visit [www.dubaicarees.ae](http://www.dubaicarees.ae). The E-Cubed Research Fund aims to strengthen the evidence base in education in emergencies, by supporting contextually relevant and usable research, and disseminating global public goods. Dubai Cares partnered with INEE in 2017 to design and manage this research fund. To learn more, please visit <https://inee.org/evidence/e-cubed>.

<sup>3</sup> These are the four dimensions of Tomaševski's (2003) [Right to Education Framework](#), which has been widely viewed as capturing the elements of access, relevance, and quality, which are of central importance within SDG4.

<sup>4</sup> In this research, institutionalisation is understood as the process of embedding AE or AE-like programmes within a national education system. This is typically exemplified by the inclusion of such programmes within national education policies and strategies, dedicated resourcing and financing for such programmes, and mechanisms within ministries of education or other government bodies for the ongoing regulation and monitoring of such programmes. It is important to note, however, that the AEWG itself has not explicitly articulated its own definition of institutionalisation to date.

This think piece aims to synthesise some of the key findings from across the five countries thematically.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, we use it as an opportunity to explore some of the working assumptions and hypotheses about both what quality accelerated education (AE) provision is, and how this might be best achieved. What is presented here does not represent the views of the AEWG or its constituent members, but rather that of the research team from the University of Auckland. The intention of this think piece is to promote discussion, dialogue and debate about how best to achieve systemic change for the tens of millions of overage and OOSCY globally—be it through AEPs or other NFE pathways.



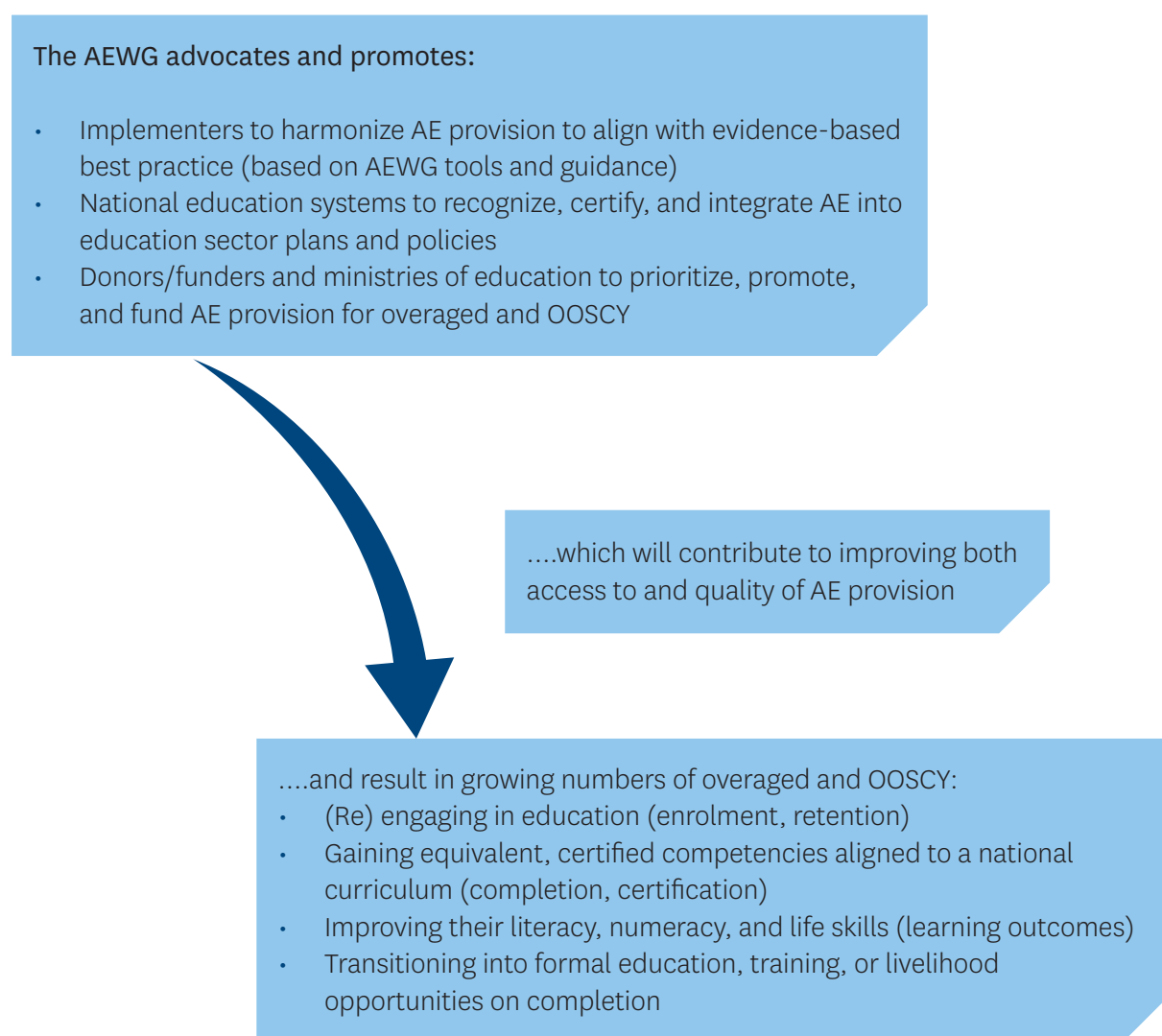
<sup>5</sup> Throughout this think piece, we reference examples from the research findings from individual countries, but do not cite specific interview or documentary data. All of this supporting information can be found in the individual country reports which are available through the [ACCESS project website](#).

## How is this work linked to the work of the Accelerated Education Working Group?

The AEWG was established in 2015 to improve the quality of AEPs through developing guidance and tools, to ensure AE is a relevant response for OOSCY, and to support a more harmonised approach to provision based on evidence. This began with the AEWG developing tools and guidance to ensure AEPs were being better aligned with evidence-based best practice in terms of their design and implementation. More recent efforts have sought to increase the recognition and visibility of AEPs with ministries of education and funders through advocacy and evidence generation. Since its inception, the AEWG has collaborated with a number of ministries of education, alongside funders and implementing partners at a national level to develop guidelines for AE provision and/or support national-level actors to lead and monitor the implementation of such programmes. Underpinning these priorities has been a set of working hypotheses and/or assumptions (shown in Figure 1 below) about both: (a) what quality AE looks like, and (b) some of what it takes to achieve this.

**Figure 1**

A Representation of the Strategic Priorities and Ambitions of the AEWG



## An expanded view of access and quality using the 4As

In Phase 1 of ACCESS we have sought to explore whether and how OOSCY can have increased access to quality AEPs if implementers harmonise provision, national education systems recognise AEPs in education sector plans and policies, and donors and funders prioritise and promote AE provision. In exploring this, we have drawn explicitly on Tomaševski's [Right to Education Framework](#), which has been widely viewed as capturing the elements of access, relevance, and quality, which are of central importance within SDG4. She outlines 4As—availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability—that define whether children and youth's right to education is being realised in practice. Throughout the work in Phase 1, we analysed the nature of current AE provision in the five countries of focus against this framework and the principles outlined in Table 1. Many of these concepts are also well aligned with the learner- and teacher-focused principles within the [AEWG's Accelerated Education: 10 Principles for Effective Practice](#).<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1**

Applying Tomaševski's 4As Framework to Our Analysis of AEP Provision

Concept	How this concept was applied in our analysis
Availability	AEP or AEP-like learning opportunities that are appropriately resourced, staffed and run are available to those who need and demand such programmes, irrespective of their circumstances within a given context. Additionally, such learning opportunities are free, with sufficient infrastructure and educational personnel, and take place in safe learning environments.
Accessibility	AEP and AEP-like learning opportunities consider the barriers which have precluded OOSCY from enrolling, or remaining in, formal education, and proactively take measures to respond to these barriers. This should be demonstrated by high(er) rates of attendance and engagement in such programmes as well as evidence of attainment of basic competencies and skills.
Acceptability	The teaching and learning approaches within AE and AE-like programmes as well as transition pathways from them are perceived as relevant to the needs of learners, their caregivers and wider communities as represented by high rates of completion and transition out of such programmes.
Adaptability	The implementation of such opportunities affords sufficient space for programmes to be responsive to the unique contextual and situational needs of individual communities and groups of learners.

In the remainder of this paper, we seek to explore whether and how some of the AEWG's main areas of strategic focus contribute to improved access and quality of provision.

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter referred to simply as the "10 Principles."

## Can standards of practice improve quality provision?



The very foundation of the AEWG's work is the belief that by developing standards of effective AE practice, and subsequently supporting uptake and alignment on the part of implementers with these standards, the quality of provision of AE for learners will improve. This was the premise on which the AEWG invested significant time and resources to develop, pilot, and refine the 10 Principles, the accompanying guide to these principles, and a range of subsequent tools and guidance (e.g., on monitoring and evaluation, teacher training, and curriculum consolidation) to support the application of these principles by donors, implementing partners, and ministries of education. While these principles have had an important function in ensuring that AEPs are being designed and implemented in ways that are aligned with evidence-based best practice, on their own this may be insufficient to improve access to or quality of programming.<sup>7</sup>

ACCESS research in Colombia and Jordan highlights, from different angles, alignment of AEPs around the 10 Principles do not necessarily equate to improved quality of AE provision, especially when they inhibit acceptability, accessibility and adaptability of programming to meet learners' changing needs.

Jordan has promoted NFE pathways for at least 2 decades to support the needs of out-of-school Jordanian and nonnational children and youths alike. One of these—the Drop-Out Programme—targets out-of-school adolescents and youths aged 12 to 20 years old. It was designed by a single implementing partner (Questscope) in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education in 2003 to create an accredited, certified pathway back into formal education for learners who had been out of school for more than 2 years. While designed to respond to the needs of vulnerable Jordanian youth, the Syrian refugee influx led to a need to increase the scope of provision of the programme to out-of-school Syrian youths, and to establish a separate Catch-Up Programme for younger children (ages 9–12) who could then reintegrate into basic, formal education. While funding (particularly in response to the Syrian crisis) has been external, and a range of implementing partners run these programmes, the Ministry of Education has continued to harmonise these efforts through tight regulation of where such programmes are offered, what is taught, and even what materials may be purchased and used. Implementing partners in Jordan view this as undermining the availability, accessibility, adaptability and acceptability of the Drop-Out Programme due to an excessive regulatory framework which lacks affordances for the needs of learners and their communities.

From the standpoint of availability, for example, the Drop-Out Programme is currently only operating in a small percentage of schools in the country. When implementing partners approach the ministry with clear evidence of demand and need for the programmes in other locations, they note the excessive bureaucracy of seeking formal approvals, and then gaining ownership from local

<sup>7</sup> See [Accelerated Education Evidence Review](#) (2020)



schools to host such programmes, often precludes opening the programme in other locations. Additionally, implementers have found it challenging to adapt their programmes to be accessible to OOSCY in Jordan because they have not been granted sufficient flexibility to address competing livelihood commitments, the transient nature of many families, and the conservative social norms that preclude older females from attending such programmes. The Drop-Out Programme has also struggled with high rates of noncompletion (upwards of 75%), in part because, as currently structured, it is unclear what its ultimate purpose is: as a pathway to reintegrate into formal education, to support the attainment of basic literacy and numeracy skills, and/or a protection and life-skills-focused intervention to enable young people to find a sense of agency and purpose in life. For the learners themselves, it would appear the latter two functions are more important than the former, yet the programme's termination point, which is a Grade 10-equivalency certificate, does not on its own serve any of these purposes. Hence, questions remain in Jordan whether harmonisation, particularly when structured around tight and centralised regulatory controls on all aspects of implementation and delivery, contributes to or diminishes the quality of AEPs.

Conversely, Colombia is an example where the lack of alignment to a common approach to programme design and delivery has allowed for a higher level of adaptability. There, the national government has long championed approaches known as flexible education models (FEMs) to enable those not in formal education to access alternative education pathways and realise their right to an education. FEMs are a menu of five ministry-approved programming options, developed to meet the specific needs of a target population through a range of modalities, including accelerating the curriculum, multigrade teaching, and distance/self-paced learning at both the primary and secondary levels, which schools can select from (or adapt and propose their own) to meet the needs of the local population. Several of these models, which are considered part of the formal education system, result in certified learning and pathways back into mainstream education.

The Ministry of Education has been instrumental in setting up a legislative and regulatory framework within which FEMs can be established, along with funding teacher salaries within these FEMs. That withstanding, those implementing such programmes are granted a high degree of freedom on curriculum design, assessment strategies, and pedagogical approaches.

Implementers range from community-based organisations, individual schools and private foundations to larger international nongovernment organisations (INGOs). They must submit a proposal to the Ministry of Education, which is evaluated and then either approved or rejected. The proposal must specify the target population they seek to serve, the length of programme implementation, and how they will ensure achievement of basic competencies for learners. Once this proposal is approved, FEM programmes are authorised to certify the primary or secondary equivalent-level competencies learners have attained without needing to have their decisions reviewed or overseen by the Ministry of Education. Beyond this, those implementing FEMs also have wide latitude on how they ensure that the programmes are designed and delivered to serve the needs of their target population. As identified in the ACCESS research, implementers noted this freedom allowed them to staff their programmes as required, develop and/or adapt their own teaching and learning materials, structure and design the timetable and teaching programme to suit learners' needs and circumstances, and mobilise additional resourcing to address some of the barriers their target population might face in remaining in education. This approach does lead to a diverse range of provisions for OOSCY and makes FEMs highly adaptable and acceptable to the communities they serve. Conversely, this high level of autonomy also makes it difficult to track and monitor the reach, scope and outcomes of FEMs at a system level and impedes efforts to ensure FEMs are accessible and available to all who need them.



The Jordan example exemplifies the risk inherent in any process of harmonisation, which is that programmes lose their capacity to be adaptable, relevant and responsive to learners; and suffer in terms of retention, transition and completion rates. This concern is not a new one and was voiced when the AEWG piloted the 10 Principles.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, without some level of oversight on how such flexibility is deployed and with what effect, as is the case in Colombia, it is difficult to show how such adaptability may lead to quality outcomes for AE learners.

ACCESS research in Nigeria and Uganda highlights the importance of advocacy and engagement efforts with funders and national education stakeholders, alongside efforts to standardise provision. If these two things do not work in tandem, the risk is that efforts to align AE provision will fail to improve the quality and accessibility of AEPs for learners who need and demand them.

In Nigeria, the escalation of insurgency in the northeast led to increasing numbers of donors and international agencies promoting AEPs to reengage those learners who had missed out on education due to chronic security risks and school closures. In establishing these AEPs, the intention was to provide an alternative and accelerated pathway for overaged learners to complete primary education and then either transition back into further, formal education or livelihood opportunities. Yet, because many of these programmes were implemented ad hoc within project-based activities, there was insufficient alignment in how they were being delivered. This made it challenging for those learners completing such programmes to transition back into formal education. This has driven significant efforts to harmonise AE provision in Nigeria. The AEWG, working alongside a national task team, has supported: (a) development of a national AE curriculum to ensure equivalency with formal education, alongside implementation guidelines for AE provision to harmonise how such programmes are structured and operated, and (b) contextualisation and piloting of a new AEWG teacher-training pack for AE facilitators.<sup>9</sup> Despite these efforts, however, there is still an acute need to ensure that there is both funding and political commitment to embed these efforts within legislative frameworks at the national and subnational levels. A key conclusion reached from our analysis in Nigeria is that much of the leadership for these efforts to date has been driven by external actors, which has led to various government departments failing to see it as their responsibility to take over the ongoing funding, regulation and implementation of AEPs. Additionally, AEPs have yet to be integrated into a policy framework approved by the National Council of Education or funded under the 2% of the consolidated federal revenue designated for universal basic education for all. Importantly, national-level civil society organisations are still unfamiliar with the work which has been done by this national task team and the AEWG and have not been significantly engaged in the work to date. In Nigeria, the support of these groups, and specifically the umbrella organisation Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All, is critical to support advocacy with key decisionmakers and policymakers. Thus, there is a real risk that, without concurrent and immediate efforts to engage and advocate with these groups, these harmonisation and alignment efforts will not materially improve access to or quality of AE provision—largely because one of the biggest constraints remains: that they remain implemented, funded and provisioned in an ad hoc and opportunistic fashion.

<sup>8</sup> See [Synthesis Report of Accelerated Education Principles Field Studies](#), p. 14

<sup>9</sup> The Accelerated Education Basic Education Programme (ABEP) curriculum and implementation guidelines were officially launched by the Ministry of Education in June 2022. The AEWG Teacher-Training Pack will be released later in 2022.

Likewise, over the course of the past decade, Uganda has seen significant efforts put into establishing a coordinated approach to AEP implementation, with implementing partners working together in consortia to streamline practices and develop sector-wide guidelines. Additionally, there has been a high level of commitment towards harmonising AE in Uganda amongst technical departments of the Ministry of Education and Sports, the National Curriculum Development Centre and implementing partners through a national AEP working group. Their efforts have led to the development of guidelines for AEPs, including a framework for district-level officials to monitor implementation of AEPs, and the development, roll out and training of teachers on a new AE curriculum. Much of this is driven by an acute and immediate need for Uganda to support pathways (back) into formal education for the large numbers of overaged refugees, particularly for its out-of-school refugee populations who would like to complete their primary education, gain a certified primary-equivalent qualification and then transition into either livelihoods or further educational opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

While these efforts are significant and have been perceived to improve the quality of AEPs in the 12 refugee-hosting districts of the country where they are being implemented, there is increasing concern from government officials that such programmes “compete” with, rather than complement, formal education provision. Officials interviewed as part of the ACCESS research in Uganda questioned whether AEPs would lead to caregivers and communities purposefully pulling their children out of formal education and waiting to enrol them in AEPs. This is because AEPs are often perceived to be of better quality, offer financial assistance and incentives not available in the formal education system (such as free uniforms, transport, meals), and allow students to complete a course of education in an accelerated timeframe.

There is merit to such concerns on the part of these officials, as research does show that AEPs end up serving large numbers of learners whom they shouldn’t, because of the perceived “added value” of such programmes to formal education provision on the part of community-level stakeholders.<sup>11</sup> Hence, while efforts of the AEWG alongside national-level stakeholders have ensured that such programmes are accessible, adaptable, and acceptable to the needs of refugee learners, community-level perceptions and understandings of learners for whom such programmes are tailored, and why additional incentives/supports are necessary for OOSCY only, still need to be changed. Otherwise, they undermine efforts to ensure that AEPs are serving those they were designed to serve—namely out-of-school and overaged students who don’t have other viable pathways. Alongside this, these perceptions create a false dichotomy which positions such programmes in competition rather than as a complement to formal education provision. Ultimately, this reduces the receptivity of national policymakers and decisionmakers in Uganda to expand the accessibility of such programmes to other groups of overaged out-of-school children throughout the rest of the country. Similar to Nigeria, then, there is an acute need for the national AE task team to also consider how to engage and communicate with communities about why AEPs are being implemented the way they are, and to ensure that implementing partners are being scrupulous in whom they enrol in such programmes. This necessitates effective regulation and monitoring of provision to ensure that the AE-implementation guidelines are being adhered to.

<sup>10</sup> Provide and Equip. (2021). The baseline survey report for the Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities (ERP). Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>11</sup> See [Metevaluation of NRCs Accelerated Education Programmes](#) (2015), [Synthesis Report of Accelerated Education Principles Field Studies](#) (2016), [Accelerated Education Evidence Review](#) (2020). In addition, in both Uganda and Pakistan, our research found examples of these community-level perceptions leading to children being intentionally withdrawn from the formal education system and enrolled in AEPs.

## What role and influence do funders have in supporting quality AE provision?

In recent years, the AEWG has taken on a stronger role in advocating with a range of bilateral and multilateral donors and funders to better support and promote AEPs as part of humanitarian, early-recovery and development responses. In doing so, the aim is two-fold. Firstly, it is to ensure that increased availability of funding for AEPs will make them available to more learners who need them, and ultimately incentivise the scaling up and wider scale institutionalisation of these programmes within national education systems. Secondly, the aim is to promote that, when promoting and funding AE programmes, donors are doing so in alignment with, and with reference to, the evidence-based principles outlined in the 10 Principles.<sup>12</sup> What we found in ACCESS was evidence which both validates the importance of funders in increasing access to, and quality of, AE programmes, and reveals some risks inherent in such programmes being pushed and driven by the international community.



In Pakistan, without the support of the international community, the current availability, accessibility and adaptability of AEPs to target populations of interest would have been greatly constrained, and government officials would have little capacity to hold oversight of what was being implemented.

In Pakistan, there is significant political will—and corresponding legislative and policy frameworks—to address the needs of OOSCY through AEPs and other NFE opportunities. The challenge in Pakistan has been insufficient financial resourcing for such provision, which has meant that national and provincial education stakeholders have struggled to translate policy into practice. While the earliest provision of NFE programmes was funded by the federal government of Pakistan, the decentralisation of education governance, coupled with growing geopolitical engagement in Pakistan by the donor community, due to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, have shifted this terrain significantly. Today, funding of AEPs is largely through external donors, though implementation is a shared endeavour between provincial education authorities and civil society actors, and regulation remains firmly in the hands of provincial education authorities. International donors have been instrumental in supporting these authorities (alongside the Federal Ministry of Education) by funding the rollout of a NFE information and management system (NFEMIS), engaging in teacher training, developing an AEP-specific curriculum, and supporting improvements to school infrastructure.

<sup>12</sup> This paper does not explore the second of these two points in great depth. There is evidence, however, when examining the policies and priorities of funders like ECHO and USAID, that AE is increasingly being promoted as a solution to the needs of OOSCY, and that, within this, explicit reference is being made to the 10 Principles. See the forthcoming 2022 AEWG Evaluation for more information on these outcomes.

In the case of Jordan, there is great potential in the transition of funding and implementation (alongside oversight) of the Catch-Up and Drop-Out Programmes to the Ministry of Education via the Accelerating Access Initiative (AAI). AAI represents the culmination of long-standing advocacy and engagement efforts of the international community, alongside national political will, and offers potential to ensure that AEPs are more widely available, acceptable and accessible for some of the most vulnerable learners in the country. It validates the premise behind the AEWG's assumption that engagement of international donors can contribute to wider scale implementation and institutionalisation of AEPs, as well as the importance of collective engagement on the issue.

Similarly, in Jordan, NFE provision has relied almost exclusively on external funding, and significant technical support in implementation by (I)NGOs. This is despite the government of Jordan's recognition of and commitment to NFE provision, including AEPs, within the National Education Strategic Plan, the Jordan Response Plan, and the National Strategy for Human Resource Development. Different to Pakistan, however, and through joint donor advocacy and engagement, the government will now take on responsibility for implementation using funding from a multidonor pooled fund, known as the AAI. The focus of AAI in its second phase is to support the most vulnerable populations of children and youth in and out of school and ensure responses like the Catch-Up and Drop-Out Programmes can be sustained and embedded within the education system. Under AAI, the Ministry of Education will have full ownership of the Catch-Up and Drop-Out Programmes—operational, financial and administrative—with donors contributing through a joint pooled fund managed by the ministry.

There are, however, some unforeseen and unintended consequences to external engagement and funding support to AEPs. This was most visible in Nigeria and Uganda.

In both Uganda and Nigeria, the funding of AEPs, through humanitarian financing channels, has led to such programmes being targeted at communities and populations affected by acute emergency issues. This has led (or could lead) to a perception on the part of national education stakeholders that AEPs may only be relevant in acute humanitarian crisis, rather than as a long-term solution to the needs of the millions of other OOSCY in both countries who suffer from other forms of marginalisation, but are not internally displaced or refugee groups.

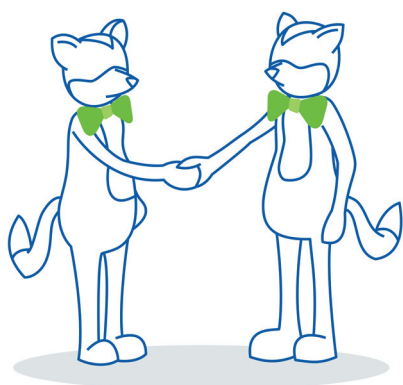
In Uganda, the Education Response Plan (ERP) outlines how the government will ensure the provision of education to children and youth in refugee-hosting areas under the wider Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Within the ERP, AEPs are identified as a key pathway for enabling overaged and OOSCY in refugee-hosting districts to gain access to and complete a primary-equivalent education. Importantly, the ERP sits outside of Uganda's Education Strategic Plan (ESP), and is seen as a temporary, humanitarian-oriented response to address one of the acute challenges the country has faced in recent years—namely how to provide education to refugee children (mainly South Sudanese) at a time when domestic financing for education is constrained and the system is challenged to support Ugandan children with accessible and quality education. The ERP is largely funded by the international community, through

humanitarian funding streams, and is managed and implemented separately from the international community's engagement with the Ministry of Education on its longer term ESP. The result of this arrangement within the education landscape in Uganda is two-fold. Firstly, there is now a strongly entrenched view amongst some in the Ministry of Education that AEPs are a humanitarian response, geared primarily towards out-of-school refugees, rather than a response which should be made available to the nearly 2 million OOSCY in other parts of the country. Secondly, this situation has made it difficult to advocate for the integration of AEPs within domestic financing commitments, and it has led to a splintering in the international financing landscape between humanitarian funding streams (geared towards the ERP) and more development-focused financing which is on-budget support and linked to Uganda's ESP. This division of both financing and governance responsibilities for education provision between refugee and nonrefugee populations also limits the capacity of the international community to take a coordinated approach to advocating for AEPs across the humanitarian–development continuum.

As mentioned previously, in Nigeria, AEPs have been implemented at a small scale in the past decade. They were promoted by the international community as an education-in-emergencies response to the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast of the country. At the time AEPs began to be implemented in the northeast, there was good reason to focus on that region, as the numbers and proportion of OOSCY were dramatically higher than in other parts of the country. Additionally, AEPs were seen as a way to deliver education in localities where no other options for formal, state schooling existed, and where many had already missed out on several years of schooling. Importantly, though, the focus on the northeast has also been shaped by securitisation and geopolitical interests of both the international community and the Nigerian state, in light of the wider counter-terrorism efforts which have emerged since the September 2001 attacks in the United States.

Today, however, the scope and scale of the need for AEPs extend far beyond this region of the country alone, and our analysis indicates that the greatest increase in OOSCY is in parts of the country (namely the south) where the international community provides minimal support. Given both the devolved nature of education provision in the country, and the very limited domestic financing available for NFE, this means that millions of OOSCY miss out on pathways back into formal education. There are two reasons for this lack of current political will, both of which are tied to the way the donor community has engaged in Nigeria in the past decade. Firstly, the international community's engagement with the OOSCY "crisis" in Nigeria remains focused almost exclusively on the north of the country. This is, unfortunately, tied up in wider political and economic relationships which bilateral funders have with the government of Nigeria, which, to date, has been reluctant to recognise the scope and scale of need for programmes like AEPs for OOSCY populations in other parts of the country. Most donors have no mandate to push AEPs as a solution to Nigeria's endemic OOSCY problem, particularly in the south, where state authorities have been reluctant to receive international support or assistance. Additionally, even in the northeast of the country, where the international community has funded and implemented AEPs, our research found that most AEPs were functioning in communities where no formal state schools exist. This, however, has the consequence of positioning AEPs as a substitute for rather than a complement to formal education. If this perception is not addressed, it could lead to a similar situation to that currently occurring in Uganda—whereby, despite AEPs being able to be a humanitarian response and support for those who have no other access to education, as well as embedded within the national education system as an alternative pathway for those who have dropped out of education at some point and seek to reengage in education, they are perceived broadly as only a relevant response to the former.

## Does recognition of AEPs in education sector strategies, policies and plans increase access and/or quality of AE provision?



In recent years, a key component of the AEWG's strategy and priority activities has been engagement with national education stakeholders and policymakers to ensure that AEPs are taken up within national education strategies, sector plans, and policies, as well as within humanitarian response plans, as appropriate. Two of the AEWG's 10 Principles assert that AEPs should be aligned with ministries of education and humanitarian frameworks, policies, and structures. Several other principles related to learners, teachers, curricula, assessment, transition pathways, monitoring, and funding emphasise the importance of alignment with strategies and policies. Across most of the ACCESS countries, a strong

legislative framework was identified which both acknowledges the rights of OOSCY to have access to alternative and NFE provision, and, in some cases, mentions AEPs as a vehicle for achieving this. However, even with a strong policy and legislative framework, and recognition and integration of AEPs into education strategies and plans, provision and quality of AEPs can remain unequal, especially in the absence of sustainable funding models.

In Colombia and Pakistan, the highly decentralised nature of the education system makes sustainable funding and provision of technical assistance for quality implementation a challenge. This, in turn, means that accessibility and availability of such programmes is lacking, particularly in areas that are most in need and most under resourced. Instead, programming is skewed towards areas or target populations prioritised by the international community, despite a supportive policy environment guaranteeing the right to education for all, including through AEPs.

In Colombia, our research identified that a robust legislative framework, coupled with the high level of decentralisation and flexibility afforded by it, has led to a diverse range of FEMs, including programmes that could be classified as AEPs. The country's General Law of Education 1994 guarantees the right to education for all children and adolescents regardless of their social background, physical capabilities, or nationality. The law goes further and clearly specifies that it is the government's obligation to guarantee the right to education for those who have been unable to access or remain in the education system or are at risk of dropping out. An important structural distinction in Colombia, though, is that FEMs sit under the umbrella of formal rather than NFE. The General Law positions FEMs as a fundamental aspect of formal education for children and youth who are part of any of the groups below who are at risk of educational exclusion:



- Students who experience chronic poverty, inequality and or the threat of violence;
- Students with special needs;
- Students who have not completed formal education;
- Students who belong to an ethnic minority group;
- Students who live in rural areas; and/or
- Students who require reintegration into society (e.g., former armed combatants).

The positioning of FEMs under formal education, and with a clear and strong mandate to address educational exclusion, has meant that they have been better funded and supported than in the other countries. Despite this, our research also identified that FEMs are still not as available to OOSCY as they could be. Rather, provision is highly unequal across varying regions of the country due to a combination of two factors. Firstly, the highly decentralised nature of the education system requires local schools, communities, or other education providers to identify the need for, and then design and implement, FEMs. Often there is little endogenous capacity to do this. Secondly, external technical support and expertise are not equally available to all regions of the country and are often driven by the interests and agendas of funders and implementing partners. At present, this has resulted in high levels of support for the implementation of FEMs in regions affected most acutely by the Venezuelan crisis, but much less support for other areas of the country affected previously by internal migration, displacement, and economic/social marginalisation. Without the Ministry of Education playing a key role in oversight, and with little coordination amongst those providing such support, our research found that decentralisation has led to the overprovision of FEMs in some areas and a complete lack of access to FEMs in others.

This was also found to be the case in Pakistan. There is a strong legislative and policy environment for AEPs which recognises the importance of quality improvement, teacher training, curricula and testing and monitoring mechanisms. Still, education is highly devolved, with major responsibility falling to the provinces for policy formulation, planning, curricula, standards, and regulation. As in Colombia, this allows AEPs to be responsive to local challenges, but they are not always sustainable (due to being largely donor funded), and provision is uneven based on the engagement and interest of both funders and technical implementing partners—again which are often driven by interests which are not focused on the level of learner need, but rather on geopolitical and securitisation concerns.

And, as previously discussed in the case of Jordan, the Catch-Up and Drop-Out Programmes are named and specified as accredited and supported NFE pathways in the ESP, the Jordan Response Plan and the National Strategy for Human Resource Development. Despite this, our analysis suggests this recognition in policy has not translated into sustained government commitment and ownership of such programmes. In the past, there has been wavering support for these programmes largely because senior decisionmakers in government did not see the importance of their continuance. At present, while AAI creates new opportunities for AEPs to be supported at scale, there is still a real lack of human resources and capacity within the NFE directorate to manage this process. While perhaps an obvious point, the Jordan example suggests that having AEPs approved and embedded in policy is only one piece of the puzzle. Recognition in policy, without the financial, organisational, and human resources required to ensure effective implementation, is unlikely to materially improve availability of such programmes or enable them to be delivered with improved quality.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This point underscores a key finding from the [Accelerated Education Evidence Review](#) (2020) which identified that although AEPs are recognised in a number of national education strategic plans, this has yet to be manifested in (a) government ownership and oversight of AEPs as a long-term strategy, (b) financial allocations to AEPs from national budgets, (c) alignment and integration of AE learners within EMIS systems. The review noted that until this is changed, AEPs are unlikely to be offered at the scale they are needed and demanded.



## Can consistent measurement and tracking of programme outcomes improve quality of programming?



Under the AEWG's leadership and based on findings from past evidence reviews that highlight inconsistencies and gaps in what data programmes are collecting, significant efforts have been made to improve guidance on which outcomes AEPs should be measuring, and how they should be doing this.<sup>14</sup> The premise is that if programmes capture this data in a more standardised way, they are in a better position to make refinements to what they do based on evidence, and there is greater visibility and capacity to track the need for and impacts of AEPs at a systems level. This, in turn, will improve the quality of programming overall, and also strengthen the evidence based on the effectiveness of AEPs.

Our research identified a number of challenges at present which preclude data being used to drive improvements in the quality of AEP provision. Firstly, more often than not, regular and consistent collection and use of high-quality outcome-level data is lacking. Secondly, even when data is collected at a programme level, and systems are in place, there remain significant issues with how well utilised such systems are. Thirdly, even when data is available at a systems level, there are still constraints which might preclude decisionmakers from accessing and utilising such information to reshape AE policy and practice.

To expand on the first of the issues above, we found through our research that if systems and structures are not in place to collate, analyse and disseminate the information being captured at a programme level, there is little capacity to understand the impact and relevance of AEPs at a systems level. In Colombia, for example, it was a significant challenge—particularly because of the decentralised approach to the design, delivery and regulation of FEMs—to capture any systems-level data on FEMs' scope, scale, reach and impact. There is a lack of coherent and consistent data on completion/transition rates through FEMs as well as data on any learning outcomes of those who have been through FEMs, even though individual implementers collect this information. This is primarily because the Ministry of Education has no current mandate, because of the decentralised governance structure, to request that FEMs report on outcome-level data once programmes are approved. This significantly undermines any level of oversight and accountability over the quality of programming occurring in individual school or community settings. Autonomy without accountability—at least in the case of Colombia—presents a significant challenge to any system-led efforts to improve the equitable distribution of FEMs and ensure quality outcomes for learners participating in these programmes.

Expanding on the second point regarding data, we found that even if systems and structures are set up to collate such data, they are only as good as the users of such systems. As noted above, in

<sup>14</sup> See [Accelerated Education Programme Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit](#)

Pakistan, and with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the government of Pakistan has set up a robust NFEMIS system to track a range of information in relation to existing AEPs across the country. The NFEMIS was set up explicitly so that the government could have a system-wide overview of what programmes are being implemented, where, for whom, for how many, and from what sources of funding. Yet, despite being developed and rolled out, the NFEMIS is not well utilised, mainly because many of those implementing AEPs are either not aware of this system or the need for them to enter key programme data into this, and/or because some providers choose not to enter data into this system. This then precludes policymakers, funders and implementers at a national or regional level having a complete overview of where AEPs are operating and with what effect. The result is that many parts of Pakistan and specific populations remain poorly served by AEPs, while other small pockets of the country are overserved, with several AEPs operating at once.

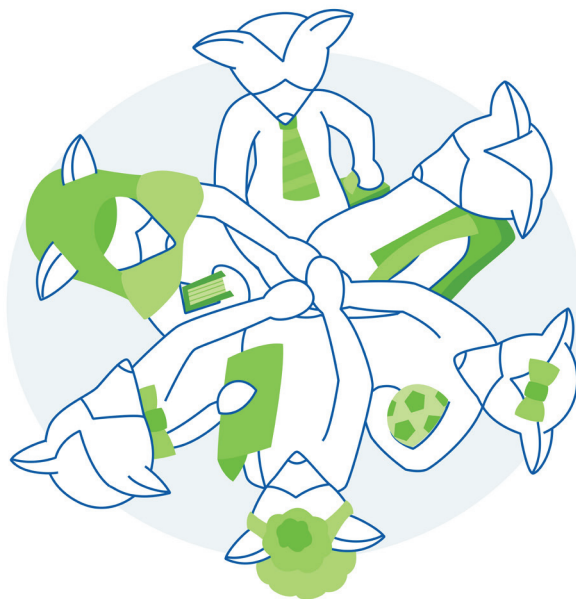
Finally, even if programme-level data on learner outcomes is collected and visible, it doesn't always lead to improvements in OOSCY's access to quality AEPs. This was found to be the case in Jordan. The research found that there were precise enrolment and completion numbers in both the Catch-Up and Drop-Out Programmes, mainly because AEP provision is more tightly regulated by the government. In both programmes, the numbers enrolled (4,806 in the Drop-Out Programme and 763 in the Catch-Up Programme in 2020) were quite low given the size of the OOSCY population in the country, and disproportionately favoured Jordanian nationals, despite the much higher proportion of OOSCY amongst Syrian refugees. Additionally, it was found that the number of learners actually attending these programmes regularly was much lower, and the number of individuals completing the Drop-Out Programme (759 in 2020 and 684 in 2021) was only a small fraction of those enrolled. While the data for the Drop-Out Programme have been regularly reported, collected and tracked by the Ministry of Education, it does not appear, until now, that there has been any impetus to change the situation and improve the relevance, availability and quality of the programme. Evidence and data on their own will rarely lead to change. Rather, unless such evidence serves a particular political agenda or remit, there is often very little motivation for decisionmakers to change.<sup>15</sup> It is only now, due to the policy window created by AAI, that such data are being seized upon as a call for reform and action on the part of the Ministry of Education and its partners.

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<sup>15</sup> This is a point covered in depth in a publication titled [Dynamics and Dilemmas within the Education in Displacement ecosystem](#), where the report concludes that "Change, in these cases, is reliant not only on ... evidence (e.g., impact or cost), but also on the value systems and priorities of 'influencers'. Contextual trends, paradigms, and formal/informal power relations are as important as...evidence in moving the needle on specific issues" (p. 33).

## Why are these findings important to the AEWG and beyond?

This think piece was written to synthesise key findings from the political economy analysis of AE provision in the five countries of focus in ACCESS, and to place them into conversation with the AEWG's strategic priorities. This research has important implications for the AEWG's work, but also for other stakeholders seeking to influence systems level change in contexts with high numbers of overage OOSCY.



Firstly, working on one piece of the puzzle, in terms of improving access or quality of education provision, without connecting it to the other pieces, is unlikely to lead to systemic change. For instance, we found that the creation of tools, approaches, guidance and evidence-based best-practice standards needs to be supported by complementary efforts to drive demand and utilisation of these new systems, tools and guidance. We also identified that creating platforms to generate evidence and data on AE provision needs to be supported by commitment and capacity to use this information to (re)shape decision making. Yet, there are a number of clear (dis)incentives for implementers, funders and regulators of education to act on what is made available to them through research, data, evaluation and assessments. Evidence, when it challenges conventional wisdom, the status quo, or prevailing orthodoxies, is not always welcomed or sought. For this reason, it is important to both create the enabling conditions under which evidence is demanded and ensure there is accountability for using such evidence. Evidence, tools and guidance are unlikely to lead to systemic change without engagement and advocacy activity, and effective accountability mechanisms.

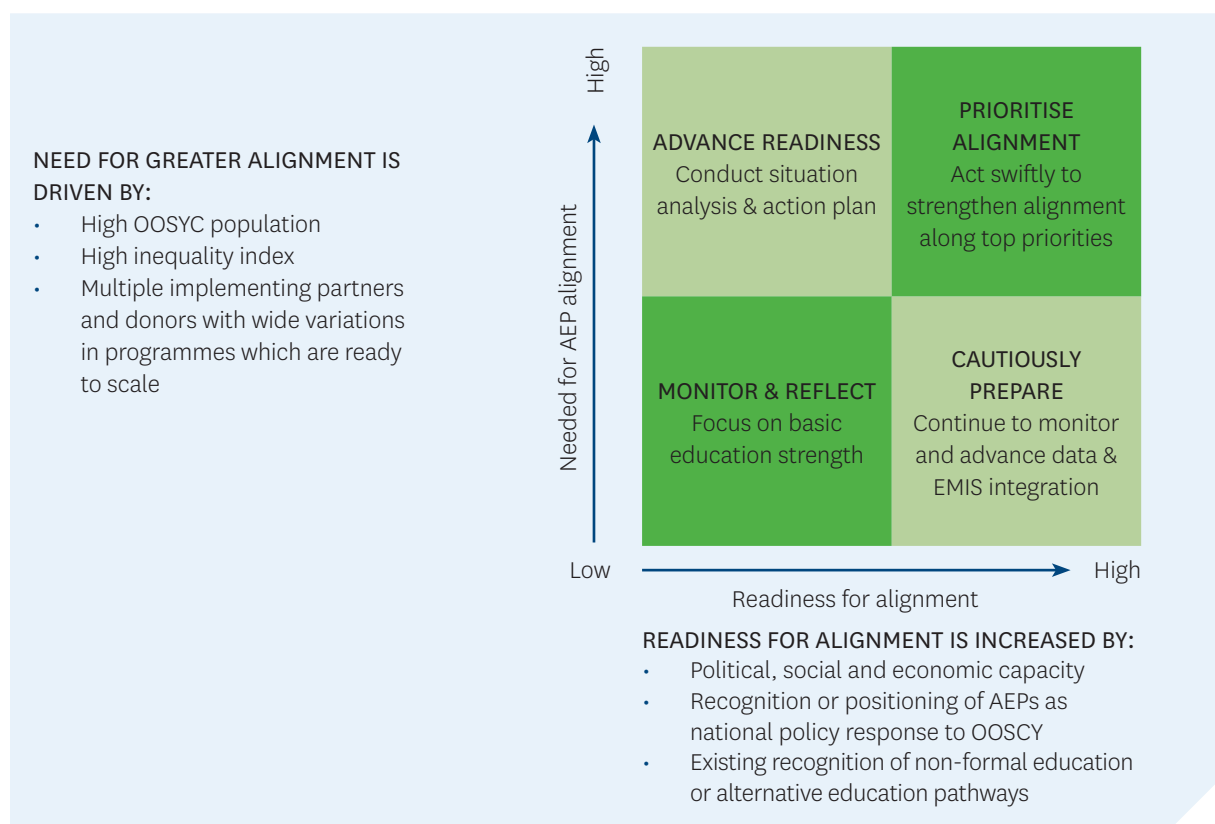
Secondly, amongst the international community there is often discussion on how systemic change requires and needs strong national political will and champions. While our research in ACCESS affirms the importance of this, we also identified how the political and/or organisational will of international donors, NGOs and UN agencies is also critical. In every one of the ACCESS countries of focus, the international community has a significant role in shaping the trajectory of AEP provision, funding, and/

or regulation. Yet this influence, as we identified, is not only driven by a desire to promote and support the interests and needs of OOSCY, but equally by their organisations’ mandates, interests and agendas which shape for whom and to what ends they are willing to engage in systemic change. For instance, the geopolitical drivers for donors to engage and support refugee response measures, which are often tied up in wider securitisation concerns, can end up undermining opportunities for systemic change for all OOSCY. And, implementing partners often seek to promote programmes and opportunities where they have a vested interest and role to play in being part of the solution. **Often, the international aid architecture and infrastructure around it does not take a learner-centric approach to engagement with and action within education systems. This undermines any potential for transformative change.**

Thirdly, and finally, our research highlights the **importance of recognising and advancing efforts for systemic change where there are clear foundations already in place.** In each of the five countries in which we undertook our research in Phase 1, we found instances of opportunities where nonformal provision could be better coordinated, regulated, funded and/or delivered to ensure that it is more available, accessible, adaptable and/or acceptable to those who need it. What varied, however, was the degree to which there was a clear “opportunity window” driven by a confluence of global, national, and local interest in doing things differently. A significant factor influencing the ACCESS project’s decision on where to carry work forward in Phase 2 was whether there was a **confluence between a “readiness for alignment” and acknowledgement amongst educational stakeholders in a country of the “need for alignment”** (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2**

Assessing a Readiness for Engagement



From [education.org High Level Guidance Document, The Post-COVID Recovery Imperative: Five Essential Leadership Lessons for closing the Learning Gap](#)

In sum, one of most significant, but also simple (but not simplistic), messages to come out from Phase 1 of ACCESS is the critical importance of approaching systemic change from a learner-centric and learner-focused approach. Tomaševski's 4As framework reminds us that when thinking through questions about the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of current education provision, we constantly need to be asking:

1. For whom, under what circumstances, and with what outcomes are these 4As being/not being met?
2. Why might that be the case based on how education is currently governed, managed, funded and delivered? and
3. What are the various scales at which these arrangements, and the shape, form and function of provision, have come to be as they are at present?

As we discovered in ACCESS, through our exploration of these questions, more often than not, the needs, interests, perspectives and aspirations of OOSCY do not figure as much as they should in establishing and then promoting pathways back into education for those who desire them.

### What's next in ACCESS?

From April 2022 to September 2024, ACCESS will convene key stakeholders in Jordan, Nigeria, and Colombia to:

1. Support collaboration amongst key stakeholders in AE;
2. Prioritise a key challenge or bottleneck precluding AEPs from meeting their objectives of providing access to high-quality education for OOSCY;
3. Develop an action plan for collectively addressing those challenges;
4. Take steps towards changes in policy and practice that address the underlying factors enabling and/or constraining change;
5. Collectively reflect on and refine their approach for making change to ensure that it is effective, actionable, and sustainable in the long-run.

Alongside this, the AEWG is considering the findings and implications from Phase 1 of ACCESS for its strategic priorities and activities moving forward. Specific actions which it would like to take from the findings of ACCESS and other research to date (pending available resources) include:

1. Prioritise learning from and engaging in a wider range of countries and regions than it has traditionally worked in, acknowledging that AEPs can and do look and operate differently in a diverse range of contexts.
2. Review the 10 Principles, and critically interrogate some of the assumptions which underpin them.
3. Strengthen actions and activities towards increased policy advocacy and dialogue at the global, regional and national levels, while continuing to support quality provision and evidence generation.
4. Develop guidance to support conduct of a political economy analysis of the education system and existing NFE provision and encourage its utilisation as a first step to shaping engagement in new countries of focus for AEP provision.

Continue to follow the work of ACCESS at [www.access-education.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.access-education.auckland.ac.nz).