The celebration to commemorate 2011 as the global International Year of Chemistry took place recently at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh. Over 1,200 officials, journalists, students and faculty members participated in the launch ceremony, followed by an enthusiastic rally of young students and chemists.

University of Dhaka chemistry student Waziha Farha said: “It’s a great honour, a really great honour to be here and to be a part of this and observe this kind of programme. It’s really encouraging.”

This year also celebrates the centennial of Madame Marie Curie’s receipt of the Nobel Prize for chemistry, in recognition of her work in radioactivity.

Madame Curie is one of the first female scientists to achieve worldwide fame, during a time in which women were discouraged from work and scholarship. “She really inspires me a lot, and she’s an idol for us female students,” said Ms. Farha. “She was a woman and had a family, yet she worked for chemistry and that was really hard for her. If she could manage it a hundred years ago, then I should be able to achieve both now.”

In a field traditionally dominated by men, Dhaka University’s chemistry department is gaining a visible female contingent. This year, the programme admitted approximately 42 per cent women and 25 per cent of the faculty is now female. Head of Department Dr. Nishat Ahmed Pasha is also part of the growing female scientific force.

Despite this surge, students and faculty members expressed concern about the lack of importance placed on science education in comparison to other sectors. University of Dhaka chemistry student Kawl Roy said: “In Bangladesh, I think the education of science is not very aggressive when compared to the European nations or the United States. I think the education system of science should be more pragmatic, more hands on.

“Other major subjects such as engineering or medicine are much more familiar to our society. Whenever you ask children, what is your ambition? Obviously, they will first go for engineering or medicine, but this also belongs to science and we should promote this, because everything has a scientific character regardless of whether it’s engineering or medical science. We should focus more on science and research in Bangladesh.”
The headmaster of Phamoung Primary School in Lao PDR has it all planned; who he will contact, and when, and where he will go in order to get children into his classrooms.

“It’s a student protection plan,” said headmaster Hassadee Suvhanaratana. “And with this we can make sure that all students have a chance to complete primary education.”

Starting this year the headmaster and his teachers have conducted a survey to find children out-of-school. If a child is not enrolled, intervention is made to persuade the parents to send their child to school. Mr. Suvhanaratana learned about the household level survey from a series of workshops on inclusive education, part of a three-year project sponsored by UNESCO and the British Foreign School Society.

Johan Lindeberg, a Programme Specialist in Inclusive Education at UNESCO Bangkok, said: “The inclusive education project is about giving children currently out-of-school opportunities to learn.

“To learn in a school free from discrimination and bias towards those who might be a little bit different, in an environment where diversity is welcomed and is seen as something positive rather than a problem.”

This particular project focuses on the needs of children excluded or marginalized from education by a variety of factors including poverty, ethnicity, religion, disability, HIV and AIDS, gender or membership of a minority group.

UNESCO toolkits and training for inclusive and learning-friendly environments were distributed to 12 pilot primary schools in Lao PDR to enable them to better understand the concept of inclusive education and apply new knowledge in the classroom.

For details access: www.chemistry2011.org/