

FORMATIVE STUDY ON UTILISATION OF LEARNING ASSESSMENTS IN KENYA

Research Summary



MAKERERE UNIVERSITY



Supported by:



About this brief



This brief is a product of the **“Adapting assessment into policy and learning (ADAPT): Adolescent 21st Century skills in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania”** project – a two-year research initiative by the Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GESCI) in collaboration with the College of Education and External Studies (CEES) of Makerere University and The University of Notre Dame’s Global Centre for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC).

It draws on literature review and key insights from GESCI’s formative study on utilisation of past and present learning assessments in Kenya. The formative study was conducted between April and July 2022. The research covered key education stakeholders including policymakers, education officials, curriculum institutes, examination authorities, teacher educators, civil society organisations, education and assessment experts and teachers.

The brief highlights the evidence on how past learning assessments have been used to shape education policy and practices in Kenya and how best to engage stakeholders in the learning assessment processes. It then concludes by listing key suggestions on how the Kenyan education system could be supported to strengthen evidence-based decision making and how the new assessment initiatives such as Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALIVE) could be positioned to support greater uptake of its learning assessment findings.

The Context



Assessment of learning is a critical element of any education sector monitoring plan. Globally, governments and key education stakeholders have established practices and approaches for rolling out large-scale assessments and examinations for gauging improvement of learning outcomes and quality of education. Learning assessments not only provide vital evidence and information on a country’s educational outcomes but also provide evidence to support inferences on how well students are learning and achieving the necessary competencies at different levels in their educational journey.

Learning assessments are a systematic approach to obtaining feedback from students, educators, parents, policymakers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational service with the findings guiding the learning process and supporting integrated educational improvement. Learning assessments are therefore meant to assist policymakers and other stakeholders in the education system in policy making and resourcing decisions for improvement.

Several learning assessment approaches exist, and they range from national examinations to cross-national and international assessments. Tests which are classroom-based assessments, national or public examinations and large-scale assessments mostly administered at the national, regional and international levels are designed for the purpose to assess learning outcomes. While classroom tests can be formative or summative; public examinations are used for certification and selection purposes (Anderson, 2019).



Public examinations also signal students’ transition levels. This demonstrates the government’s commitment to provide quality education. Public examinations further obtain adequate information on student learning outcomes; assess schools regarding the implementation of the curriculum and teachers’ ability to deliver appropriately.

The most notable learning assessments in Kenya are: EGRA, EGMA, SEAQMEC/SACMEQ, NASMLA and UWEZO. These assessments have mainly focused on numeracy and literacy. With the growing drive to have 21st century skills in the curriculum, there are growing efforts to assess children beyond their foundational literacy and numeracy levels.

However, most of the notable assessments do not have any components focused on assessing 21st century skills. The culture of assessing 21st century skills is still in its formative stages in Kenya due to lack of tools. Assessment of Life skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE) is a new local initiative aimed at developing contextualized tools for assessing 21st century skills.



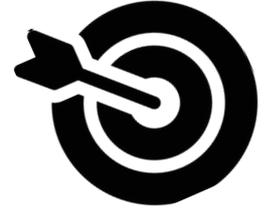
Until recently, not much was known about the extent to which these learning assessments have been utilised to influence education policy and practice. This study therefore sought to collect evidence on utilisation of past and present learning assessments.

The Project

“Adapting assessment into policy and learning (ADAPT): Adolescent 21st Century skills in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania” project is a two-year research initiative. The project aims to promote the acquisition of 21st century skills for adolescents by strengthening the utilisation of data from learning assessments in curriculum design, adaptation, and delivery.

The project specifically seeks to:

- Generate lessons from past and present national and regional learning assessments and initiatives to enhance national data-driven decision-making.
- Build capacity of a dynamic learning community to integrate and assess 21st century skills and support the utilisation of learning assessments at the school and sub-national (district/county/region) levels.
- Mobilize policy uptake on the utilisation of learning assessments in the education plans, curriculum frameworks, and teacher development.



ADAPT is being implemented by the Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GESCI) in partnership with the College of Education and External Studies (CEES), Makerere University and the Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child, University of Notre Dame. It is funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), under the Knowledge and Innovations Exchange (KIX) program.

The Formative Study

To realize the project objectives as stated, there was a need to conduct a study to establish how past learning assessments have been used to inform education policy and practice across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The study also sought to find how the utilisation of the existing learning assessments can inform and better support the utilisation of initiatives such as Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE).



The research specifically sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the lessons about national data-driven decision-making from past and present national and regional learning assessments in East Africa?
- How can we use the learnings from past assessment experiences to establish and strengthen a dynamic learning community in East Africa?
- Who are the key actors and networks within the education systems of the three countries, and how do they work as far as utilisation of learning assessments is concerned?
- What are some of the best practices, successes, challenges, and barriers to the utilisation of learning assessments across the three countries?
- What are the best ways in which to support policymakers at the national level to integrate the ALiVE learning assessment into data-driven decisions to improve curriculum design and delivery?

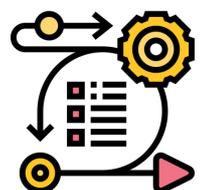
This brief presents the highlights of the key findings and recommendations to support the strengthening of the use of learning assessment data in educational planning and policy. One may however need to read the long report to get the full picture.

Research Methodology

The study adopted conceptual and participatory techniques with a qualitative approach. On the conceptual part, a desk review was conducted to establish the policy-making process and the utilisation of the regional and national learning assessments to inform the education policy-making processes.

The desk review task, besides identifying the key national learning assessment actors (practitioners, providers, and users), informed the design of the study tools which was done in collaboration with the ADAPT teams from Uganda and Tanzania. The tools formed the basis for collecting qualitative data through in-depth interviews. In Kenya, both face to face and telephone interviews were used to collect data.

Purposive sampling was used to select the most relevant key informants from the Ministry of Education (Directorates of Policy and Special Needs Education) and line institutions, which included the Kenyan National examinations Council (KNEC), Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI), Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) and Kenya National Commission for UNESCO. Non-state actors include international agencies (UNICEF), civil society organisations (PAL Network, RTI, USAWA Agenda and ZiziAfrique) and individual experts. A preliminary list of institutions and individuals was generated through brainstorming and consultations with the project team. Snowballing was used to expand the list. A final list was arrived at in liaison with the ADAPT project team. The qualitative study reached a total of 75 participants.



Summary of key findings



The findings of this formative study have generated insights on the learning assessment context, uptake and utilisation. This summary provides the highlights of the main findings outlined under seven broad themes discussed below:

Finding 1: Key actors in learning assessments in Kenya

The research identified several key actors in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, and utilisation of learning assessment in Kenya.

- The Ministry of Education Kenya regulates assessments through the National Assessment Center (NAC), a unit within the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC). KNEC is the country's mandated national testing and assessment body which coordinates most of the official assessments managed by the government. It is, however, not clear whether NAC is supposed to regulate non-state assessments for compliance with the curriculum and ensure they meet the testing standards, or the extent to which these tests accomplish the set assessment goals.
- International Development partners such as The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) have also worked with research institutions such as the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to implement learning assessments such as EGRA and EGMA.
- Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as Twaweza East Africa (now Usawa Agenda) in – Kenya who have implemented the UWEZO citizen-led learning assessment in Kenya.

The study findings also revealed that there is minimal coordination and collaboration among these stakeholders and networks, reducing the possible benefits of synergies and associated benefits such as peer learning for improvement. There is also unnecessary duplication of initiatives leading, sometimes, to initiative fatigue at the school level since most of these initiatives take place in schools.

Finding 2: Knowledge and awareness of learning assessments

There is limited knowledge of learning assessments among education stakeholders. For instance, apart from the end of cycle examinations under the 8-4-4 and CBC education systems, teachers' and head teachers' engagement with, and knowledge of large-scale learning assessments tends to be minimal.

Even when they are familiar with initiatives such as TUSOME and EGMA, their knowledge is attributed to having attended workshops on early literacy and numeracy because they teach lower primary learners. Primary school teachers were more likely than upper primary or secondary school teachers to be aware of EGRA and EGMA.

Even those who had some knowledge about learning assessments such as the Uwezo's Citizen-led assessments lacked detailed information on these assessments.

Finding 3: Utilisation of learning assessment evidence in education policy and practice

The study found evidence that data from learning assessments have in the past informed significant improvements in education policies and practices in Kenya. However, stakeholders believe the level of uptake and utilisation of the data is still low.

There are only a few notable examples of how past assessments have been used to influence policy and practice in Kenya:

- Evidence from a pilot intervention project (Primary Math and Reading-PRIMR), the precursor to Tusome reportedly influenced a shift in the role of Curriculum support officers (CSO, formerly known as TAC tutors) from monitoring school administration to teacher support for effective curriculum delivery. It also encouraged CSOs to use coaching, feedback to teachers and classroom observations, with the highest number of CSO visits to schools recorded in 2017 compared to the previous years. Regular visits by CSOs ensured fidelity to the curriculum and increased the likelihood of achieving the intended learning outcomes.
- The EGRA and EGMA results were reportedly used to improve teachers' curriculum delivery capacity by improving instructional support for better reading outcomes among lower grade learners. There are indications that EGRA results were used to improve the curriculum delivery capacity of teachers by providing instructional support for better reading outcomes among lower grade learners.
- SACMEQ conceptualized as a planning tool, has contributed to quality improvement through limiting each textbook shared to two learners. It also facilitated the institutionalisation of gender sensitive indicators, placing it on the MoE's agenda as measures of access and quality.

- Uwezo's focus on citizen's action, successfully drew public attention to the poor quality of learning and learning outcomes through the slogan 'learners are in school but not learning' and giving evidence on why they are not learning. Several interventions have emerged based on this realisation. Parents have also been sensitised on their role in improving learning. Innovations such as accelerated learning approaches and remediation implemented by various actors have continued to be informed by UWEZO data. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that other interventions within the Universal Primary Education (UPE) strategy such as school feeding programs have also been influenced by UWEZO data.
- Another example of assessment approaches that aim to improve teacher behavior and institutional culture was demonstrated by Tusome (2014-2019). An analysis of Tusome's design, scalability, and accountability for learning outcomes showed overall positive effects on policy and practice as far as decentralized instructional support, teacher behavior and student learning outcomes were concerned.

Finding 4: Factors hindering utilisation of learning assessments in Kenya.

This study identified several factors that hinder the uptake and utilisation of learning assessments in Kenya:

- **Poor conceptualisation of learning assessments:** The study found relatively low awareness of the assessment findings among the practitioners (teachers) and mid-level officers (county/sub-county level) as compared to the technicians and policy makers at the MoE headquarters. Most actors within the system still associate assessment with examinations. There are no visible efforts to deepen knowledge and understanding on learning assessments among education officials, teacher educators and teachers.
- **Capacity/Knowledge challenges:** There is a strong insider recognition that most officers do not have the capacity to interpret data and knowledge in ways that makes sense in their work, thus contributing to the low utilisation of the assessment findings. There were also challenges relating to the lack of, or inadequate assessment capacity at multiple levels, i.e. at the personnel, teacher and policy levels. Our findings draw attention to critical capacity gaps in personnel required to administer and manage the assessment process effectively. Administering tests focusing on life skills and values require more advanced skills sets than the assessment of literacy and numeracy. Many of the teachers in our sample revealed poor understanding of the purpose of the assessments and the assessment methodologies.
- **High-stake examination culture within the education systems:** With the ethos of schools derived from examination cultures, life skills and values teaching continue to be de-emphasized by both parents and teachers. National examinations seem to be a more acceptable benchmark for assessing education quality rather than learning assessments.
- **Limited resources to conduct and sustain learning assessment efforts:** Conducting learning assessment was seen as an expensive venture and many of the stakeholders echoed the fact that much as they would have loved to conduct learning assessment, they do not have the financial capacity to sustain the endeavour.
- **Poor attitude of the stakeholders towards learning assessments:** While many of the stakeholders appreciate the need for the 21st century skills, their attention and focus was found to be on the end of cycle examinations. Some of them perceived the assessment of life skills and values as very difficult and others expressed negative attitude about the relevancy of assessing life skills and values.
- **Weak institutionalisation of research:** At the MoE level, there appears to be limited capacity in research and data translation among the technical officers and policymakers to go beyond the pre-packaged policy briefs and critically analyse and engage with the data. Linked to the above, is the issue of institutionalisation of research. We found there was no department or even a unit within the Directorate of Policy dedicated to research though MoE insiders talked of plans to establish a research coordination mechanism or an evidence repository that would provide a platform for analysis, the synthesis of those findings and link this analysis to policy making and see what it is working, what's not working. It is expected that if and when established, this would go a long way to address the gap.
- **Lack of uniform understanding of life skills and values:** The measurement of life skills and values has been challenging globally, especially at a large scale. The subject matter is complex - life skills and values are intangible, and the same concepts may be defined differently from one place to another, with nuanced differences even within the same geographical localities, same ethnicities, and religions.

Finding 5: Stakeholder engagement and awareness of Learning Assessments in Kenya.

The study checked the levels of knowledge and awareness of learning assessments amongst key stakeholders.

- There is limited stakeholder engagement, which affects the level of awareness of the assessment process among policymakers and practitioners, particularly in the public sector. The limited stakeholder engagement is associated with the stakeholders' understanding of learning assessment and their purpose as limited to accountability and gauging what learners know, and what they do not.
- Minimal consultation and dissemination of the findings particularly to the lowest level amongst the teachers therefore leaving them largely disengaged. The dissemination channels used were not always adequate or appropriate. There are also concerns on time lags in the communication of results, especially in the case of regional assessments like SACMEQ.
- There is poor linkage of the the assessment processes and the private sector. Stakeholders say these this has led to a disconnect between what employers expect of school graduates and what is being assessed in as far as 21st century skills are concerned.
- However, recent innovations and initiatives within the learning assessment space such as Uwezo assessment and the ALiVE project indicate increasing stakeholder engagement in the learning assessment and utilisation processes.

Finding 6: Conceptualisation and development of Life Skills in Kenya

The study revealed that to some extent, life skills and values have been taught and assessed in Kenya's schools. The level of assessment referred to here is largely under the primary school thematic curriculum.

However, such assessments have been formatively done at the class level and largely lacking at the end of cycle examination.

The research also revealed the following:

- While life skills are presented within the curriculum documents, the study participants thought that the formal assessment of these skills would encourage teachers to nurture them at the classroom level. They perceived assessment as a critical motivator for practitioners to put emphasis on nurturing life-skills.
- The study also revealed that much as stakeholders have hope in the new Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in teaching and assessing life skills and values, many of the stakeholders still wonder how such assessments will take place.
- While some of the learning assessments in Kenya have included elements of life skills and having been disseminated to the stakeholders, there still exists challenges to the realisation of their effect on improving learning outcomes.

Finding 7: Integration of ALiVE into data-driven decisions within Kenya's education system

While discussions about the assessment of the 21st century skills in Kenya are not new, they are largely at the level of documentation at the curriculum design level with minimal efforts at the assessment level. In Kenya, just like in Uganda and Tanzania, the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI), has designed a tool to assess life skills and values.

According to the study participants, this is the first assessment tool that is exclusively focused on life skills and values in the country.

For better uptake and utilisation of the ALiVE assessment tool, the following key proposals emerged from the study:

- Provide capacity building sessions for different stakeholders at various levels so that they can use the tool and the learning assessment data effectively. This could involve sessions on how the tool is designed and how the assessment data can be interpreted so that it informs education policymakers and practitioners at different levels.
- Build Communities of Practice (CoP) focused on increasing knowledge on assessments and utilisation of assessment of results and demystifying assessments to make them more relevant to the education system.
- Coordinate all assessment innovations and interventions and align them to education reform processes to increase their demand and usability in the ongoing conversations and policy processes. The design of the tools should be relevant to the policy stipulations of the country for greater ownership.
- Involve and engage all key stakeholders in conceptualisation, contextualisation, tool administration and reporting the dissemination of findings from learning assessments.

Implications of these findings to future learning assessments

The study has provided evidence that learning assessment findings contribute to education sector reforms at the policy and at the practice level. The extent of the uptake varies at the different levels of the policy process including agenda setting, policy formulation, policy implementation and policy evaluation.

Several factors related to poor conceptualisation, limited capacities for knowledge translation, resource constraints, inadequate dissemination of findings and lack of institutionalisation of assessments in education planning processes hinder the uptake of learning assessments data and evidence.

The findings have several implications on how governments and organisations conducting learning assessment may structure their processes.

Recommendations

- Assessments teams could work with experts of past large scale assessments to borrow their experiences on how to analyse the large-scale learning assessment data, disseminate learning assessment findings as well as practical modalities for making closer follow-up after the dissemination.
- Embed a robust dissemination strategy in the conceptualisation and planning stage of all learning assessments processes. This will enable the results to reach the widest cross section of stakeholders and particularly the middle-level and sub-national middle level policy makers who influence what happens at the lowest level such as schools, teacher training institutions and communities.
- Employ rigorous data collection processes supported by contextually relevant tools and an extensive analysis of the assessment findings for diverse audiences and end users.
- Strengthen the capacity of teachers and other education stakeholders for effective development, utilisation and assessment of life skills at the school level. This is important as the skills are not integrated in the teacher (pre-service) education curriculum as an explicit subject. In addition, there is need to strengthen the capacity of teacher educators and teacher training colleges on life skills and values. so that teachers graduate with knowledge on how to nurture and assess life skills.
- Create more awareness about the ALiVE initiative among the key stakeholders and intended beneficiaries. As a household-based assessment, there is need to reach out to other authorities including the county governments which have the mandate to deliver Early Childhood Development Education (EDCDE) as well as vocational training. This should help the adoption and application of the tools in different settings.
- The ALiVE tools should be disseminated widely for use within school settings. The government could partner with similar initiatives to ensure more tools are developed to cover more skills and values.
- Coordinate and connect existing initiatives meant to support acquisition and assessment of 21st century skills.

About the Consortium

Consortium Lead: The Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GESCI) is an international non-profit organisation founded on the recommendation of the United Nations Task Force on Information Communication Technology (ICT). GESCI was established in 2003 at the first World Summit on the Information Society. GESCI works with governments and partners to strategically develop and apply models of good ICT-based practice for high-quality education & training and to build effective leadership abilities in ICT and Knowledge Society development among Government officials across the developing world. GESCI also contributes towards a Knowledge Society for all, based on the principles of equal opportunities, inclusiveness, empowerment, accountability, and sustainability. GESCI's role in this consortium is the overall management and realisation of the project. This will include but not be limited to, leading all aspects of project coordination, knowledge generation, knowledge mobilisation and coordinating capacity building, the learning agenda, and advocacy, particularly in Kenya and Tanzania where there is a physical presence, and social capital within the education sector.

Partner 1: College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University (CEES), Uganda. As the oldest and one of the largest teacher training facilities in the East African Community (EAC), the College of Education and External Studies (CEES) is well placed to collaborate and advise governments and has great influence with educators, community workers, administrators, inspectors of schools, curriculum designers, and community outreach implementers at all levels of the education system. It also aids the provision of adult, continuing, community, open, distance, and e-learning. The College is a respected centre of excellence in the development, research, and application of professional educational approaches in response to national and global needs. CEES is responsible for the project's implementation in Uganda.

Partner 2: The University of Notre Dame's Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC) collaborates with researchers and practitioners around the world to ensure the physical, emotional, social, and mental wellbeing of children and adolescents in low-resource and conflict-affected settings. Using an innovative whole-child development approach tailored to context-specific needs, GC-DWC translates research into timely and thoughtful action, adapts research tools to improve the development of learning programs and policies, and activates systems (families, schools, and communities) to ensure that children and adolescents can thrive. GC-DWC has previously led global measurement and learning groups and is currently part of global working groups around social and emotional learning and skills development- for children and adolescents. As the global knowledge leads in this project, GC-DWC manages knowledge translation and capacity building.

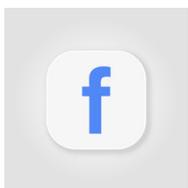
To cite this brief:

GESCI (2022) : Utilisation of Learning Assessments in Kenya-A research brief based on the formative study on utilisation of learning assessments in Kenya.

© GESCI 2022

e-mail: info@gesci.org

GESCI
Unga House
Muthithi Road, Westlands
P. O. Box 66380 - 00800
Nairobi, Kenya



GESCI



@GESCI



@gesci_works



www.gesci.org