

FORMATIVE STUDY ON THE UTILISATION OF LEARNING ASSESSMENTS IN TANZANIA

Research Summary



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 Tanzania. 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 organizations, education and assessment experts and teachers.

The brief examines the evidence on how past learning assessments have been used to shape education policy and practices in Tanzania. It also discusses how best to engage stakeholders and concludes by providing reflection on how best the education systems could be supported to strengthen evidence-based decision making and how the Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa – ALiVE – initiative 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 Tanzania are: EGRA, EGMA, MELQO, SAQMEC 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 these skills. Yet, most of these 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 Tanzania 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.



Not much is known about the extent to which these learning assessments have been utilised to influence policy and practice. This study therefore sought to collect evidence on utilisation of past and present learning assessments.

The Project

The Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GESCI) through support from Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) under the Knowledge Innovations Exchange (KIX) Program, is implementing a two-year project “Adapting assessment into policy and learning (ADAPT): Adolescent 21st Century skills in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania” with a consortium of 3 organizations-Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GESCI) as the Lead Organization, Makerere University’s College of Education and External Studies (CEES) and The University of Notre Dame’s (UND) Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC).



The project aims to promote the acquisition of 21st-century skills for adolescents by strengthening the utilization 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 utilization of learning assessments at the school and sub-national (district/county/region) levels.
- Mobilize policy uptake on the utilization of learning assessments in the education plans, curriculum frameworks, and teacher development.

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 affect policy and practice across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The study 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 gather data on the following:

1. What are the lessons about national data-driven decision-making from past and present national and regional learning assessments in East Africa?
2. How can we use the learnings from past assessment experiences to establish and strengthen a dynamic learning community in East Africa?
3. 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?
4. What are some of the best practices, successes, challenges, and barriers to the utilisation of learning assessments across the three countries?
5. 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?



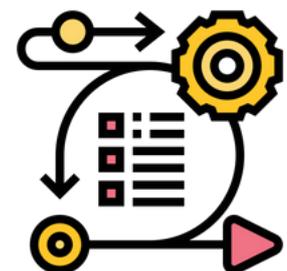
Research Methodology

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

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 Kenya and Uganda. The tools formed the basis for collecting qualitative data through in-depth interviews.

In Tanzania, both face to face and telephone interviews were used to collect data. Data was collected from Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Arusha and Zanzibar. Most of the potential study participants were found in these locations. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select participants. A final list was arrived at in liaison with the ADAPT project team.

There were 76 study participants drawn from the national level (policy makers, curriculum development officials, curriculum developers, and national examination councils), practitioners (Non-Governmental Organisations, Community Based Organizations) and donor agencies/ development partners.



Summary of key findings



The findings of this first 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 Tanzania

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

- National Examination Council of Tanzania (NECTA) and Zanzibar Examination Council (ZEC) are the two main government agencies that regulate the delivery of learning assessments in the United Republic of Tanzania's mainland and Zanzibar, respectively.
- International Development partners such as UNICEF, UNESCO have also worked with research institutions such as the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to implement learning assessments such as EGRA/EGMA and MELQO.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Twaweza East Africa, who have implemented the UWEZO citizen-led LA across mainland Tanzania
- Other donor-funded programmes such as Education Programme for Results (EPfOR), Shule Bora, Tusome Pamoja and Jifunze Uelewe.
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), the President's Office - Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) and development partners, specifically Department for International Development (DFID), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the World Bank have also been engaged in national assessment to provide guidance, assistance, and advice.
- Education Programme for Results (EPfOR) has in the past played an advisory role in all the stages of the preparation of assessment guidelines and moderation of reading and arithmetic skills assessment tools to ensure comparability in the 2016 EGRA/EGMA study.

The study found that most of these actors implement the assessments in close collaboration with other actors including NECTA & ZEC. NECTA learning from the experience of these actors designed and implemented the first national Standard II LAs in 2019 with the same funded by Literacy and Numeracy Education Support (LANES). In this regard, only one national Standard II, LA has been administered in Tanzania.

Finding 2: Knowledge and awareness of learning assessments

There is limited knowledge of learning assessments among state actors. Most of the participants particularly the middle level managers including tutors, ward education officers, teacher resource centers, heads of schools and classroom teachers at the secondary and primary level associate learning assessments with the continuous assessments as conducted at the school level and national examinations as conducted at Grade Four, Seven, Form II, Form IV and Form VI.

Non-state actors on the other hand appeared to have more knowledge on learning assessments systems, process and utilisation as they associated learning assessments with learning outcomes and assisted in bench-marking and comparison of some indicators along the curriculum goals with other countries.

Finding 3: Utilisation of learning assessments in policy making

The study found evidence that data from learning assessments as in the past informed significant improvements in education policies and interventions in Tanzania. However, stakeholders believe the level of uptake and utilisation of the data is still low. Currently, there are two notable examples of how past assessments have been used to influence policy and practice in Tanzania:

- The use of EGRA, EGMA and MELQO results reportedly influenced the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) to develop the National 3R (reading, writing, and arithmetic) programme through which the curriculum was reviewed and teacher training program was rolled out with the support of Global Partnership for Education (Anderson & Sayre, 2016).
- In 2010, UWEZO started conducting citizen-led learning assessments to establish evidence on the learning levels using Grade One and Two curriculum which focuses mainly on mastery of literacy and numeracy competencies among children aged six to sixteen, mostly at the primary level. The findings are widely disseminated to different stakeholders for the purpose of bringing a systemic change. For example, in Tanzania there was a change in Grades One and Two curricula with the same arising due to the UWEZO citizen-led learning assessment findings. UWEZO learning assessments have also been reportedly used to design interventions to address the gap as established from the findings such as the Teaching at Right Level (TaRL) approach. Projects such as Shule Bora and EPfOR, for example, were allocated in areas that demonstrated poor learning outcomes with this determined by the learning assessment results.

Finding 4: Factors hindering utilisation of learning assessments

This study identified several factors that hinder the conduct utilisation of learning assessments in Tanzania:

- **Conceptualization of learning assessments:** 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.
- **Costs:** Most learning assessments are donor funded and are run as programmes within project initiatives, making them unsustainable. This inhibits the level of institutionalisation that can happen for learning assessments in the education system.
- **Resistance to data and evidence:** The key national stakeholders are reluctant to engage in the debate emanating from the learning assessment results particularly when they are perceived to be negative or indicating government failure. Policy makers are also not fully utilizing the learning assessments results as intended to inform classroom practices and policy reforms.
- **Poor and uncoordinated dissemination strategies:** Most of the assessments do not trickle down to the relevant stakeholders in the country. While there have been efforts to disseminate findings at the national level, most of the reports end up reaching the top-level policy makers and a few of the duty bearers and education practitioners. Non-state learning assessment efforts such as UWEZO seemed to have received wider national coverage compared to the national learning assessments because they have clear dissemination strategies.

Finding 5: Conceptualization, development and assessment of Life Skills

The study found that the conceptualization of life skills learning is still poor and varied among education stakeholders in Tanzania.

- On the one hand, organizations that work with schools to develop life skills view skills like collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication skills, sexual education and hygiene as the ideal examples of life skills.
- Participants in learning institutions on the other hand associate life skills with extra-curricular activities such as participation in games, competitions among others. The later conceptualization was common in schools and in teacher education colleges.
- Other study participants view life skills as the skills acquired by studying vocational courses like cookery and needlework which enable one to learn specific trade or occupational skills.

Although slow, there is some progress with the integration of life skills in the national curriculum.

- In 2005, the Tanzania national curriculum introduced Competence-Based Curriculum to facilitate the assessment of life skills in other subjects. At the primary level, the subject “Stadi za Kazi” Addresses life skills as a stand-alone subject. Life skills is also integrated in the subject “General Studies” at the advanced level.
- When it comes to nurturing life skills, NGOs in Tanzania have various programmes geared towards enabling students to acquire or develop the various skills. They include: GLAMI, FEMINA HIP, CAMFED and Milele Zanzibar Foundation, etc.
- However, there is a gap in the development of life skills among teachers, as life skills content including the related assessments, do not feature in the teacher education curriculum.

Finding 6: Assessment of Life Skills in the Education System of Tanzania

The study found that there is a growing recognition of the need to assess life skills in a classroom setting but the practice is yet to be widespread because of various reasons:

- There is an assessment challenge because the life skills are embedded mostly in academic subjects. It is therefore difficult to delineate them for assessment purposes, with no specific tool aimed for the purpose.
- Even when they are assessed, there is a general perception that findings from the life skills assessment do not have any contribution to the students' formative or summative assessments even though they inform classroom practices.
- In teacher education colleges, life skills aspects such as collaboration and teamwork are assessed during teaching practice in a confidential form filled by the heads of the school making it something that is closed from the teachers themselves.
- Even NGOs working on nurturing life skills do not seem to have access to the assessments due to lack of tools for the purpose.

There are two notable ongoing initiatives to assess life skills in Tanzania namely:

- The National Standard II Learning Assessment administered by the NECTA which assesses life skills. In this assessment, six types of questions are used to assess students' mastery of life skills based on learner's speed and accuracy.
- A group of non-governmental organizations led by Milele Zanzibar Foundation (MZF) designed the first contextualized tool for assessing life skills in Tanzania called the Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE). The ALiVE initiative focuses on four competencies: problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking and respect. The ALiVE tool is the only local initiative aimed at developing contextualized tools for assessing 21st century skills.

Finding 7: Integration of ALiVE into data-driven decisions

This study revealed that most of the assessments are mainly focused on numeracy and literacy. The lessons from past assessments and how they have been utilised however, provide some recommendations. Policymakers at the national level could better utilise current and future assessments including those focused on life skills such as ALiVE to improve curriculum design and delivery:

- Create more awareness of existing assessments, their objectives, tools and their potential use in informing the education policy and practices. In this regard, it is important to first create awareness about the ALiVE tool to the key stakeholders from the national level, middle level policy makers and at the school level.
- The awareness creation should be supported by the capacity building to the practitioners at the school level and at the middle level policy makers (quality assurers, tutors, District Education Officers and teachers) about the broader conceptualization of skills, relevance of assessing skills and the significance of the ALiVE tool in the process. The capacity building component for the stakeholders should also focus on how they can utilise the learning assessment results effectively.
- Strengthen the capacity of national and sub-national education decision-makers and managers in knowledge translation, data usage and application of learning assessment tools at the classroom level. Work with examination authorities to strengthen research translation, data analysis and interpretation.
- Build a 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.
- Align the assessment processes to education reform processes to increase their demand and usability in the ongoing conversations and processes. The design of the tools should be relevant to the policy stipulations of each country for greater ownership.
- Involve all key stakeholders in conceptualization, contextualization, tool administration, reporting the dissemination of findings of learning assessments.



A group photo of participants at the ADAPT Project Launch in March,2022

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Implications of these findings to the ALiVE learning assessments

The findings have 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 conceptualization, 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

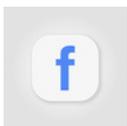
- Embed a robust dissemination strategy in the conceptualization and planning stage of all learning assessments processes. This will enable the results to reach the widest cross section of stakeholders and particularly the middle-level and sub-national middle level policy makers who influence what happens at the lowest level such as schools, teacher training colleges and communities.
- Employ rigorous data collection process supported by contextually relevant tools and an extensive analysis of the assessment findings for diverse audiences and end users.
- Develop institutional policy for dissemination and monitoring of the development as arising after dissemination. This is also a key towards effective utilisation of learning assessments.
- Strengthen the capacity of teachers and other education stakeholders for effective development, utilisation and assessment of the 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.
- Create more awareness about the ALiVE initiative.
- Develop greater dissemination and training on these tools so that there is application at the school levels by teachers. 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 address skills development and assessment practices.

To cite this brief:

GESCI (2022): Utilization of Learning Assessment in Tanzania – A research briefing based on the formative study on the utilization of learning in Tanzania.

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