

FORMATIVE STUDY ON UTILISATION OF LEARNING ASSESSMENTS IN UGANDA

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 the formative study on utilisation of past and present learning assessments in Uganda. 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 Uganda. It also discusses how best to engage stakeholders in the learning assessment process. It then concludes by providing reflections 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 Uganda are: EGRA, EGMA, NAPE, SEAQMEC 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 Uganda 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

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.



The project 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 policy and practice across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

The study sought to find out how past experiences in utilisation of learning assessments can inform and better support the up-take of initiatives such as Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE).

The research specifically sought to answer the following questions:

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?



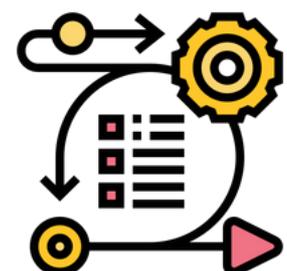
Research Methodology

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 Tanzania. The tools formed the basis for collecting qualitative data through in-depth interviews.

In Uganda, both face to face and telephone interviews were used to collect data. Data was collected mainly from the greater Kampala region – Kampala, Wakiso, Mpigi and Mukono. 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.

The study reached a total of 43 participants drawn from the national level including; policy makers, curriculum development officials, curriculum developers, national examination bodies, practitioners, Non-Governmental Organisations, Community Based Organizations and teachers.



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 Uganda

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

- Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) and Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB) are the two main government agencies that regulate the delivery of learning assessments in Uganda. The Directorate of Industrial Training (DIT) is also charged with the mandate to assess and certify competence-based learning achievements at different levels within the TVET sub-sector.
- 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 and EGMA.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Twaweza East Africa, and now Uwezo – Uganda who have implemented the citizen-led LA in Uganda.
- There are also agencies and organisations that are charged with the mandate to design curricula at different levels such as NCDC (mainly for Pre-primary, primary and secondary school levels), and Kyambogo University that is responsible for the curriculum of Primary Teachers Colleges (PTC) and National Teacher Colleges.
- There is also the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) that is charged with the responsibility of policy and regulation working through various departments and agencies such as DES, NCHE, among others

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. These is also unnecessary duplication of initiatives leading, sometimes, to initiative fatigue at the school level since most of these initiatives target schools.

Finding 2: Knowledge and awareness of learning assessments

There is limited knowledge of learning assessments among the Learning Assessments actors. Many of the participants particularly the school leaders and teachers had their knowledge skewed towards end of cycle examinations and school-based assessments.

Even those who had some knowledge about learning assessments such as the Uwezo's Citizen-led assessments and the National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) lacked detailed knowledge about these assessments.

Finding 3: Utilisation of learning assessments in policy making

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

- The use of EGRA and EGMA results reportedly influenced the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) to inform the use of use local language as a medium of instruction within the Thematic Curriculum at the lower primary school level (P1-P3).
- Different Learning assessment reports have informed government and other actors in policy and practice. For example, the Uwezo Learning Assessment reports have raised awareness of the stakeholder that many of the learners are in school but not learning and why they are not learning. Recently this led to stakeholders including the government to start the feeding programme within Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools.

Finding 4: Factors hindering utilisation of learning assessments

This study identified several factors that hinder the implementation and utilisation of learning assessments in Uganda.

- **Structural challenges:** 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:** Some of the policymakers interviewed indicated that learning assessments, especially for young learners, are far above their level and often inhibit learning instead of enhancing it, due to inadequate capacity of the stakeholders to use assessment or utilise the assessment data. There was also Limited capacity to link assessment results and learning achievement and lack of training on assessments - Much as learning assessment is a critical part of the learning process, many of the teachers might not be adequately trained to conduct learning assessment, especially in assessing life skills and values.
- **Limited resources to conduct and or 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 can 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 attitudes about the relevancy of assessing life skills and values.
- **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: Stakeholder engagement and awareness of Learning Assessments in Uganda

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.
- Minimal consultation and dissemination of the findings particularly to the lowest level amongst the teachers therefore leaving them largely disengaged.
- The limited engagement of stakeholders in the assessment process, to some extent had created a gap between what the employers expect of school graduates and what is actually being assessed.
- 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.
- Recent innovations and initiatives within the learning assessment space such as Uwezo assessment and the ALiVE project indicate increasing stakeholder engagement.

Finding 6: Conceptualization and development of Life Skills in Uganda

The study revealed that to some extent, life skills and values have been taught and assessed in Uganda'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.

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 lower secondary curriculum in teaching and assessing life skills and values, many of the stakeholders still wonder how such assessment will take place.

Many of the stakeholders have hope in that the new lower secondary school curriculum regardless.

While some of the learning assessments in Uganda have included life skills and having been disseminated to the stakeholders, there still exist challenges to the realisation of their effect on improving learning outcomes.

Finding 7: Integration of ALiVE into data-driven decisions

While discussions about the assessment of the 21st century skills in Uganda are not new, they are largely at the level of documentation at the curriculum design level with minimal efforts at the assessment level. In Uganda, just like in Kenya 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:

- 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 can better inform education policymakers and practitioners at different levels.
- 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.
- Coordinate all assessment innovations and interventions and align them 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 and engage all key stakeholders in conceptualization, contextualization, tool administration, reporting the dissemination of findings of learning assessments.

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 institutionalization of assessments in education planning processes hinder the uptake of learning assessments data and evidence.

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

Recommendations

- The ALiVE team could work with experts of Uwezo and NAPE to borrow their experiences on how to analyze the large-scale learning assessment data, disseminate learning assessment findings as well as practical modalities for making closer follow-up after the dissemination for policy and practice.
- 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 institutions 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.

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.

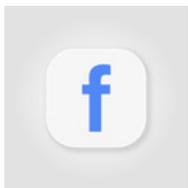
Partner 2: The University of Notre Dame's Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC) collaborates with researchers and practitioners around the world to ensure the physical, emotional, social, and mental wellbeing of children and adolescents in low-resource and conflict-affected settings. 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.

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