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Developing the Enabling Context for Student Assessment in Uganda

Anil Kanjee and Sylvia Acana



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About the Series

Building strong education systems that promote learning is fundamental to development and economic growth. Over the past few years, as developing countries have succeeded in building more classrooms, and getting millions more children into school, the education community has begun to actively embrace the vision of measurable learning for all children in school. However, learning depends not only on resources invested in the school system, but also on the quality of the policies and institutions that enable their use and on how well the policies are implemented.

In 2011, the World Bank Group launched Education Sector Strategy 2020: Learning for All, which outlines an agenda for achieving “Learning for All” in the developing world over the next decade. To support implementation of the strategy, the World Bank commenced a multi-year program to support countries in systematically examining and strengthening the performance of their education systems. This evidence-based initiative, called SABER (Systems Approach for Better Education Results), is building a toolkit of diagnostics for examining education systems and their component policy domains against global standards, best practices, and in comparison with the policies and practices of countries around the world. By leveraging this global knowledge, SABER fills a gap in the availability of data and evidence on what matters most to improve the quality of education and achievement of better results.

SABER-Student Assessment, one of the systems examined within the SABER program, has developed tools to analyze and benchmark student assessment policies and systems around the world, with the goal of promoting stronger assessment systems that contribute to improved education quality and learning for all. To help explore the state of knowledge in the area, the SABER-Student Assessment team invited leading academics, assessment experts, and practitioners from developing and industrialized countries to come together to discuss assessment issues relevant for improving education quality and learning outcomes. The papers and case studies on student assessment in this series are the result of those conversations and the underlying research. Prior to publication, all of the papers benefited from a rigorous review

process, which included comments from World Bank staff, academics, development practitioners, and country assessment experts.

All SABER-Student Assessment papers in this series were made possible by support from the Russia Education Aid for Development Trust Fund (READ TF). READ TF is a collaboration between the Russian Federation and the World Bank that supports the improvement of student learning outcomes in low-income countries through the development of robust student assessment systems.

The SABER working paper series was produced under the general guidance of Elizabeth King, Education Director, and Harry Anthony Patrinos, Education Manager in the Human Development Network of the World Bank. The Student Assessment papers in the series were produced under the technical leadership of Marguerite Clarke, Senior Education Specialist and SABER-Student Assessment Team Coordinator in the Human Development Network of the World Bank. Papers in this series represent the independent views of the authors.

About the Authors

Anil Kanjee is a Research Professor at Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa. He has vast experience as an independent consultant advising on student assessment. Formerly, he was an Executive Director at the Human Sciences Research Council, heading the Centre for Education Quality Improvement. His current research focuses on the development of effective assessment systems at the local and national levels, the development and use of education indicators, and the application of item response theory to test development and score reporting. He has extensive experience in national and international studies and has authored numerous publications on educational assessment and evaluation. He has a doctorate in Education from the Research and Evaluation Methods Program, University of Massachusetts Amherst (1995).

Sylvia Acana was a Principal Examinations Officer at Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEBC). She headed the National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE) program until she passed away in 2012. In addition to her work on NAPE, Acana provided technical support in assessment to the Economic Policy Research Centre and to Save the Children. She was an executive committee member of the International Association for Educational Assessment (IAEA) and vice chairperson of the Board of Governors, Loro Core Primary Teachers College. She was a former secondary school science teacher and held a master's degree in educational measurement and evaluation.

Acknowledgments

Sylvia Acana passed away while this paper was being prepared for publication. This posthumous publication is a tribute to her work and dedication to improve education in Uganda, and in Africa. It is also a way to channel her energy and keep her ideas alive among friends, colleagues, and the broader education community.

Executive Summary

Uganda's commitment to improving the quality and outcomes of its education system has translated into a parallel commitment to creating a stronger, more sustainable student assessment system, one that includes (i) examinations for selection and certification; (ii) large-scale assessments for monitoring education quality at the country level; and (iii) classroom assessments for evaluating student work and informing ongoing teaching and learning.

What conditions are necessary to create a stronger, more sustainable student assessment system? The focus of this paper is on the enabling context—policies, institutions, human and fiscal resources—that has allowed Uganda to build its assessment system.

A combination of elements helped Uganda succeed. These include: clear policies mandating the various assessment programs; having one institution provide leadership for all assessment activities; and having a stable and well-qualified team of staff at the leading assessment institution.

A number of lessons can be learned from Uganda's experience. First, political stability and a strong commitment to education are key drivers for building a strong assessment system. Second, charging a single institution with all assessment activities can allow for clearer institutional structures, as well as efficient coordination, development, and implementation of assessment programs. Third, competitive salaries need to be in place to attract and retain personnel, and training needs to be provided for capacity building. Finally, a strong focus on student learning and curriculum reforms can act as important catalyst for strengthening the assessment system

Developing the Enabling Context for Student Assessment in Uganda

Anil Kanjee and Sylvia Acana

Introduction

Governments are increasingly recognizing student assessment systems as a crucial component in ensuring student learning and education quality. Assessment systems typically comprise different types of assessments for different purposes: examinations for student selection and certification; large-scale assessments for monitoring student performance at the national level and for international comparisons; and classroom assessments for evaluating and providing feedback on student work, and promoting teaching and learning. Although efforts in these areas have grown over the last decade or so, too few countries have in place the right enabling context for a sustainable assessment system.¹ While Uganda is still in the process of refining its assessment system, it offers useful lessons in creating the right enabling context for sustainable assessment activities.

In learning from the Uganda story, it is important to bear in mind the historical and social context in which its assessment system operates. Uganda, a country located in East Africa, gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1962. However, the country's first 25 years were filled with oppression, corruption, economic collapse, tribalism, and civil war. Overcoming its unstable beginnings, Uganda has become a model for development in Africa (Ward et al. 2006). Since the 1990s, economic policies have generated solid economic growth in the country. Agriculture is the main economic activity, employing over 80 percent of the workforce. Unsurprisingly, around 80 percent of Uganda's nearly 34

¹ For a general discussion of different types of assessments, and the enabling context for developing an assessment system, see Clarke (2012).

million citizens live in villages and small trading centers. Almost 50 percent of the population is under the age of 15.

Uganda inherited from its colonial past a well-institutionalized school system. The structure of the school system in Uganda is 7-4-2; that is, seven years of primary education, four years of lower secondary (Ordinary level), and two years of upper secondary education (Advanced level). As of 2009, Uganda spent 3.2 percent of GDP on education, half of which was funded by foreign aid (Ward et al. 2006). Great strides have been made in expanding access to education. Uganda's pre-independence primary enrollment rate of 50 percent in 1960 climbed to 91 percent by 2010. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) continues to struggle to improve the retention, quality, and equity of education.

The expansion of the school system has brought new challenges in ensuring quality and equity in education. The implementation of the Universal Primary Education program in 1997, followed by the Universal Secondary Education program in 2007, significantly contributed to increased enrollment. As is common experience, however, the focus on expansion of access to schooling was not coupled with an equally aggressive commitment to student retention and quality. In 2010, more than 10 years into the Universal Primary Education program, the primary completion rate was only 57 percent.² Although there are signs of improvement, the quality of education in Uganda remains poor, with low numeracy and literacy rates among primary-aged students. Additionally, significant inequities remain across regions and social groups (Hedger et al. 2010).

Uganda has a comprehensive assessment system for monitoring and supporting education quality. Its British colonial past left a strong tradition in examinations. These are administered at the end of each school cycle and are used as certification and selection mechanisms for student advancement through the education system. Large-scale assessments were introduced in the 1990s and are used for monitoring education quality at the country level, and for making international comparisons. Classroom assessment has been traditionally used by

² Data gathered from the World Bank (www.worldbank.org).

teachers to grade student work. A recent reform has pushed for it to be used to inform pedagogy and support student learning.³

Key lessons from the Ugandan experience with developing an effective national assessment system include the following. First, there is a need for political stability, a high degree of political will, and commitment and support for education policies that translate into assessment reforms. The management of assessment activities through a single organization allows for clearer institutional structures, greater coordination, cross-fertilization of experiences among staff, and greater efficiency in use of resources. A sustainable assessment system requires qualified personnel who stay long term and can be trained. The government's demand for data from the various assessments further helps to institutionalize the system. And finally, curriculum reform is an important catalyst for the development of continuous classroom assessment.

This paper examines the enabling context—policies, institutions, human and fiscal resources—that has allowed for the development of a stronger and more sustainable assessment system in Uganda. The paper begins with a description of the current context for assessment activities, with a particular focus on the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB). Following that, key characteristics of the types of assessment activities carried out in Uganda are described. This is followed by a discussion of some of the factors that have allowed for the sustained development of these assessment programs. The last section presents lessons that other countries can draw from Uganda's experience.

Enabling Context

Uganda inherited from the British colonial system a strong tradition in examinations. Even after independence, most subjects were taught according to the British syllabus and examinations were conducted on the basis of the British system under the auspices of the East African Examinations Council. The Council was not disbanded until 1980, after

³ This paper focuses only on student assessment programs administered during primary and secondary education.

which the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) was established with the passage of a 1983 law.

A strong policy framework supports assessment activities in Uganda. The Government White Paper on Education of 1992 is the cornerstone education policy text in the country. It calls for addressing inadequacies in the assessment system detected by the Education Policy Review Committee of 1989. These weaknesses included a narrow testing focus, which emphasized recall of factual information at the expense of application, reasoning, and problem-solving skills; the absence of attempts to test practical skills or social attitudes; and the lack of any attempt at continuous classroom assessment. The White Paper and other related laws allowed for the creation of the national large-scale assessment program, NAPE (National Assessment of Progress in Education), and for the reform of classroom assessment activities.

UNEB's responsibilities expanded over the years. Initially, the board was responsible only for end-of-level examinations. Gradually, its responsibilities extended into the area of national and international large-scale assessment programs. The examination board was and remains the only institution in Uganda with the required capacity and infrastructure to successfully conduct large-scale assessment activities. UNEB also has taken the lead in classroom assessment reforms. As of 2012, UNEB is in charge of all major student assessment programs in Uganda.

UNEB is highly institutionalized and has clear governance. The UNEB executive secretary is appointed by the president of Uganda. The executive secretary is supported by a governing board staffed by members from the MoES's three technical directorates: the Directorate of Basic and Secondary Education; the Directorate of Higher, Technical, and Vocational Education and Training; and the Directorate of Education Standards.

UNEB is clearly structured to carry out its responsibilities. The Primary School Examinations Department and the Secondary School Examinations Department are directly responsible for conducting the examinations relevant to each level. NAPE is responsible for national and international assessment. This section is headed by a Principal Examinations Officer (PEO), who is directly supervised by the UNEB executive secretary. Five other officers—two senior examinations officers

and three examinations officers—work under the PEO. Below these are three examinations assistants and two stenographers. In addition, an Advisory Committee, comprising members drawn from the key education stakeholder groups in the country, oversees the operations of the NAPE section.

UNEB has a stable and qualified staff to carry out assessment activities. Stability has been possible due to the status associated with working for UNEB, and due to the higher salaries compared to other institutions from which staff are drawn. Most staff members have postgraduate qualifications with relevant work experience. However, staff capacity is stretched, given the broad remit of UNEB.

There have been significant improvements in the capacity of UNEB staff to run assessment programs. For example, data analysis was initially outsourced to local university staff; now it is carried out in-house. In 2002–03, UNEB staff received technical training for the national large-scale assessment program through the support of the World Bank. Uganda’s participation in international assessments has enabled UNEB staff to exchange experiences with other countries. UNEB has also contributed to building assessment capacity within the country. As of 2012, 800 teachers had received training from UNEB staff in test question writing and test development.

Having one institution running all assessment programs has allowed for synergies and greater efficiency. UNEB staff can provide technical assistance and train the teams in charge of international assessments. This support has been especially important in the development of instruments and reporting of results.

However, efforts to build capacity in classroom assessment have not been equally effective. The MoES and UNEB conducted a massive campaign to train district staff, school heads, and teachers, but this seems to have had little impact on teacher knowledge and practices (Altinyelken 2010). Monitoring and support of schools and teachers by the district offices remain weak (Weerhe 2010).

The annual income for UNEB comes from three primary sources: examination fees (67.5 percent), government grants (16.4 percent), and other sources such as sales of publications and donor income (16.1 percent) (UNEB 2012). The first three national large-scale assessment surveys (NAPE) were fully funded by the World Bank. Since then,

funding has been provided by the MoES. Funding for the Monitoring of Learning Achievement (MLA) study was provided by UNICEF and the MoES, while the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) assessment is funded by the MoES.

Examinations

In Uganda, public examinations play a key role in the education system, as their results determine educational opportunities for millions of students. They act as gatekeepers, allocating the scarce number of places available in the school system among the student population. Despite the high pressure these examinations place on students, they are considered the most fair, meritocratic, objective, unbiased, and efficient way to decide who passes to the next educational stage. They also are believed to contribute to education quality by motivating students and their teachers to excel (MoES 2004).

In Uganda, public examinations are used for student certification, for tracking, and for selection into tertiary education. Students sit for examinations in grade 7, at the end of primary education (Primary Leaving Certificate, PLE); in grade 11, at the end of lower secondary education (Uganda Certificate of Education, UCE); and in grade 13, at the end of upper secondary (Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education, UACE). Students with high marks on primary and lower secondary examinations continue on for academic training. Students with poor marks continue on to technical training or leave the school system. Ssewanyana, Okoboi, and Kasirye (2011) note that between 2003 and 2006, only 50 percent of pupils who passed the PLE went on to secondary schooling, and the majority of those who enrolled in lower secondary schools dropped out before the age of 18 years. High achievement on the UACE is the most direct route to university entrance.

Administration of these examinations presents a major challenge. In 2012, nearly one million students registered for the three end-of-school-cycle examinations. Malpractice remains a substantial problem. The most common examples of malpractice include external assistance to candidates; smuggling of unauthorized materials into examination

rooms; collusion or copying among candidates; substitution of genuine answer scripts with ones written outside examination rooms or outside the examination period; and an impersonator taking the examination instead of an actual candidate. In 2007, UNEB cancelled examination results for 2,742 candidates and closed examination centers for seven schools (*Monitor* 2007). In 2008, there were 290 cases of malpractice in PLE administration, 1,376 in UCE, and 72 in UACE (Ogwang 2010). While these malpractices persist and are widespread, UNEB is aware of the problem and has taken a range of measures to limit the impact (Magara and Chandiru 2012). These include deploying 8,600 scouts and 500 officials to monitor the administration of the 2012 examinations, and warning candidates and schools that UNEB could cancel results or close examination centers proved to be engaged in cheating (Magara and Chandiru 2012).

Critics have pointed out important weaknesses in the examinations, including: (i) their very high-stakes nature; (ii) the narrowing of the curriculum taught in class to match materials covered in the examinations; (iii) excessive targeting of lower-order thinking skills; and (iv) having students repeat the grades prior to the examinations in order to increase passing rates (Bukonya 2001; Penny et al. 2008).

Reforms were implemented to address these weaknesses. Examination questions were revamped to include higher-order thinking skills. There also is a plan to compute examination results using both the examination test scores and classroom assessment information (with the latter to be weighted at 25 percent of the total result). These changes have reinforced the institutionalization of continuous assessment. New policies have removed financial barriers to taking the examinations. Expansion of access to examinations came about as part of a policy package that mandated the government to pay all candidates' fees for the examinations. For example, the 2002–05 Medium Term Budgetary Framework allocated US\$4 million dollars (approximately seven billion shillings) to cover fees for the primary examinations. Removing fee barriers further institutionalized the examinations, as they are now open to all students. It also increased the retention of students in schools (MoES 2001).

Large-Scale Assessments

Uganda has a well-established large-scale assessment that is used to monitor student performance at the national level. The country is also taking its first steps into the realm of international large-scale assessments.

National Large-Scale Assessment

The national large-scale assessment program, NAPE, was introduced to address important gaps in the school system. Before NAPE, Uganda relied on examinations data to monitor education quality. However, because examinations were primarily a tool for selection, they had limitations for monitoring quality. NAPE was introduced to monitor education quality in the context of the Universal Primary Education policies. Uganda did not have valid and up-to-date information on student learning over time. Consequently, planning and administration suffered.

The functions of NAPE are to: (i) monitor student performance according to the curriculum standards; (ii) identify variables related to student performance; (iii) provide guidelines for improving teaching and student learning; and (iv) inform planning and research.

The assessment instruments are criterion-referenced tests based on the national curriculum. At grades 3 and 6, the subjects tested are numeracy and literacy, while biology is tested at grade 9. In addition to student performance, data on the teaching and learning environment are obtained from students, teachers, head teachers, and parents using questionnaires and interviews.

NAPE has been expanding gradually over the years. The first NAPE survey was administered in 1996 to a national sample of grade 3 and grade 6 students. It was conducted again in 1999 and 2003 before becoming an annual assessment in 2005. The first secondary level NAPE survey, administered to a national sample of grade 9 students, took place in 2008 and is also now conducted annually. These target grades were selected with the rationale that there would be time to apply corrective measures before the end of each school cycle.

The national assessment is a major operation. In 2011, NAPE was administered to 24,533 grade 3 and 24,143 grade 6 primary students drawn from 1,232 primary schools selected from the 112 districts of Uganda. At the secondary level, NAPE was administered to 19,790 grade 9 students and 500 teachers drawn from 524 government and private schools selected from the 112 districts.

Results from the national assessment have been used to push for reforms in Uganda. NAPE findings revealed low levels of student achievement in literacy and numeracy. Consequently, the MoES, jointly with development partners, developed interventions to raise learning standards. One of the interventions involved placing emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the curriculum for lower primary grades, and enforcing the policy on the use of the mother tongue (local language) as a medium of instruction in these classes.

NAPE results also have been used to address public concerns over perceived changes in the quality of schooling. In 1997, Universal Primary Education (UPE) was implemented to extend access to education to all primary-aged students. However, after its implementation, parents, as well as teachers and MoES staff, perceived a decline in the quality of schooling due to the increase in students (Altinyelken 2010). NAPE results were used to analyze changes in pre- and post-UPE student performance. Analysis showed that both the percentage mean scores and the percentage of pupils functioning at the required level decreased immediately after UPE was introduced (Acana 2006). Later data indicated that the trend had generally reversed, as over the years relatively more pupils were reaching the required ratings. This use of data underscored the need for an evidence-based approach to assessing quality levels.

International Large-Scale Assessments

Uganda participated in the international large-scale assessment program known as SACMEQ in 2000 and 2007. The 2007 SACMEQ exercise tested a national sample of grade 6 students in reading and mathematics. Overall, 5,307 students from 264 schools were sampled. The results showed that Uganda ranked 11 out of 15 countries in reading and mathematics. Scores were reported on an Item Response Theory scale, with a mean of 500 and standard deviation of 100. The overall national

mean score for reading was 479, while for mathematics the mean score was 481. In addition, teacher performance on reading tests was reported as 727 in 2007, indicating an upward trend from the mean score of 696 reported in 2000 (Makuwa 2011).

Uganda also participated in the 1999 MLA project, conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This assessment aimed to monitor goals of the international Education for All initiative. The MLA measured the performance of grade 4 students in literacy, numeracy, and life skills, while questionnaires were also administered to students, parents, teachers, and the school head. The MLA sample was composed of 8,346 students, 8,311 parents, 295 teachers, and 280 school heads. Results showed that only 10 percent of students attained the desired mastery level for numeracy, and only 23 percent mastered literacy (Chinapah 2003).

Uganda has yet to participate in any of the major international surveys such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Performance in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), or Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Classroom Assessment

Efforts to improve the student assessment system in Uganda led to a reform of classroom assessment practices. The need to improve teaching and learning created a push for a comprehensive curricular reform and for the launching of a program to improve teacher practices in classroom assessment.

The reform to classroom assessment was based on the recommendations of the 1989 Education Policy Review Committee. This committee noted that, among other shortcomings, the education system was examination ridden, and that there were very few attempts at continuous monitoring of student performance at the school level. Consequently, the 1992 Government White Paper on Education called for curricular reform and the reform of classroom assessment practices. The new curriculum began to be introduced in the lower primary grades

in 2007, and is expected to be completely implemented at the primary level by 2013 (Read and Enyutu 2005).

Implementation of the curricular reform set the stage for introducing reforms in classroom assessment (Altinyelken 2010). However, as curriculum and classroom assessment go hand-in-hand, the development and implementation of reforms in the latter area was delayed by the multiple, prolonged challenges encountered by reforms in the former. In 2007, the MoES, lead by UNEB and with the collaboration of the National Curriculum Development Centre, introduced a reform program to improve classroom assessment. Because this program emphasized the ongoing nature of classroom assessment, it is referred to as continuous assessment.

The reform aimed to address important weaknesses in classroom assessment practices. Teachers were mainly using classroom assessment for summative purposes; that is, for judging student performance and for making decisions about student progression. Classroom assessment was mainly understood as assessment *of* learning. This was consistent with the use of examinations to judge, rather than to support, student learning. Teachers were developing and administering their own tests to grade and promote pupils to the next grade. Teacher skills in test development were generally poor, mainly focusing on lower-order recall questions (Odongo 2006).

The continuous assessment reform aimed to change the teaching culture so that classroom assessment was mainly used for formative purposes; that is, to inform pedagogy, to provide feedback to students, and to promote learning. Assessment would become more meaningful and supportive of the curriculum and classroom instruction. The goal was to make a shift from assessment *of* learning toward assessment *for* learning, as espoused by Black and William (1998).

The reform also aimed to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning through the use of valid and reliable teacher-made assessments. Continuous assessment was conceptualized as “a systematic, objective and comprehensive way of regularly collecting and accumulating information about a student's learning achievement over a period of study and using it to guide the student's learning and determine their level of attainment” (UNEB 2010).

Teacher practices were also targets for change. After reform, teachers were expected to (i) observe and follow each student on a daily basis, (ii) record student progress across a number of competencies, and (iii) provide qualitative descriptions of student performance instead of quantitative marks. These changes required considerably more resources and support for improving teacher practices.

The reform was also designed to produce changes in school management. At primary grades 1 to 4, schools and districts were expected to use continuous assessment information for monitoring learning and teaching. They were also expected to use this information for planning purposes through integration into the district-level Education Management Information System (EMIS). At primary grades 5 to 7, continuous assessment was to be used for reporting on end-of-cycle attainment, with 25 percent of the continuous assessment mark integrated into the final PLE examination score.

Continuous assessment still has a long way to go before becoming an established part of Ugandan school culture. Reception by teachers and parents has been uneven, and teacher trainings have not been thorough or sufficient. Many teachers are confused and unprepared to fully and properly implement a continuous assessment reform in their classes.

Parents were perplexed by the student report cards generated under continuous assessment. Being familiar with the prior, simpler reporting system of marks, parents did not understand the implications or significance of the more qualitative description of students' progress. To appease parents, some schools carried out examinations, or added marks and the position of the child within the class in future progress reports (Altinyelken 2010). Parent opposition to the report cards was so great that the National Curriculum Development Centre and UNEB also revised their progress reports to include marks and descriptions about student achievement levels in selected competencies.

Drivers for Assessment Reforms

Uganda has transited a long journey in developing and strengthening its examinations, large-scale assessments, and classroom assessment

practices. A number of drivers contributed to the current state of development:

Political stability. The MoES and UNEB made a sustained commitment to key educational policies. This allowed for the long-term planning and development of various assessment programs.

Leadership. At the MoES, there was a will at the highest levels to improve education quality and develop an effective assessment system.

International policies. UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank have highlighted the need for, and usefulness of, strong assessment systems. The launch of the 1990 Education for All and Millennium Development Goals programs pushed Uganda to implement reforms, expand the school system, and monitor quality. The government of Uganda's commitment to these goals led to prioritization of the development of a student assessment system. The government's use of, and subsequent demand for, data to monitor the quality of the education system further institutionalized the need for these assessments.

Strong policy framework. The 1989 Education Policy Review Commission (EPRC) report, the consequent 1992 Government White Paper on Education, and the 2008 Education Act set the stage for introducing, sustaining, and improving the examinations, the national large-scale assessment program, and the continuous classroom assessment reform.

Centralizing assessment activities in UNEB. The institutionalization of the government's commitment to assessments through the establishment of a formal agency, UNEB, initiated stability in assessment activities. UNEB effectively leads the development of the national assessment system and its various activities. The direct line of accountability between the UNEB executive secretary and the MoES facilitates coordination and communication regarding national goals and activities.

Competitive salaries. This allowed UNEB to have a stable, well-qualified staff. Having a stable staff preserves institutional memory and provides collective experience within the organization. This leads to a continuous strengthening of assessment activities.

Qualified, long-term personnel. The success of Uganda's assessment activities has been the result of progressive development of the already well-qualified UNEB staff. Participation in international assessment exercises and receiving technical assistance from the World Bank

expanded the in-house experience and skills of assessment personnel as they worked with regional and international assessment institutions. In contrast, the ineffective training of teachers and MoES staff in continuous assessment lead to a rocky start to the program.

Participation in international assessments. Participating in SACMEQ and MLA allowed staff at UNEB to gain new experiences, extend skills, and develop professional networks.

Curriculum reform. This was a catalyst for the development and implementation of continuous assessment. The interconnectedness of the curriculum and day-to-day classroom assessment demanded collaboration between UNEB and the National Curriculum Development Centre. Initially, this collaboration stymied the implementation of continuous assessment due to delays in the development of the curriculum. An integrated curriculum and continuous assessment program was finally launched, with mixed results.

Public support. In Uganda, public support has allowed for the continuation and strengthening of assessment policies. Concerns about the quality of education have reinforced the annual large-scale assessment program, NAPE. The need to counterbalance the examinations led to strengthening classroom assessment practices. In contrast, parents' initial response of confusion to continuous assessment report cards demanded a step back from implementation policy.

Situational factors complicated a successful implementation of continuous assessment. Large class sizes were a serious impediment to the implementation of continuous classroom assessment. It is unlikely that a single teacher would be able to effectively follow up to 70 students on a daily basis. As a result, continuous assessment is rarely done (Altinyelken 2010). The resurgence of commercially generated tests also has undermined the continuous assessment reform. Often, these commercial weekly, monthly, and end-of-term tests, which only focus on testing, recording, and reporting, take precedence over teacher-developed assessment (Weerhe 2010).

Lessons Learned

Uganda's vision of a quality education system with a focus on student learning created the push to strengthen the country's system of assessment activities. This paper explored Uganda's journey in developing and reinforcing the enabling context for this assessment system. Some of the key lessons to be learned from Uganda's experience include the following:

Political stability. This allows governments to sustain their commitment to key educational policies and provide consistent leadership at necessary institutions. Political stability also allows for long-term planning and development of various assessments.

Commitment to global education policies and goals. The Education for All and Millennium Development Goals initiatives, and their like, can act as catalysts for assessment reforms in many countries. The need for planning and monitoring, and for ensuring that all students are learning, has created urgency for strengthening assessment systems.

Strong policy framework. Policy documents calling for improvements in education and for assessment reforms provide an institutional base for developing stronger assessment systems.

One central assessment institution. Countries aiming to develop their assessment system may consider having one leading assessment institution. This has several benefits. It reduces wasteful duplication of fiscal, physical, and human resources; streamlines communication between coordinating bodies; and facilitates cross-fertilization of skills and knowledge among staff involved with various assessments. A single institution also can provide a clearer organizational structure and direct accountability for various assessments. Additionally, a single organization facilitates the alignment, compatibility, and synergy between the various assessments, as well as between assessments and curriculum.

Capacity building. The success of any assessment activity is directly related to the capacity of the personnel developing and implementing it. In developing countries, assessment institutions need to attract personnel who are eager to learn. Opportunities for learning would come from on-the-job experience, from participating in international assessment programs, and from formal training provided by

international donors. Competitive salaries are required to keep trained personnel in the assessment institution.

Institutionalized use of assessment data. Due to limited access to secondary education in Uganda, the public has come to accept the use of end-of-level examinations as the most democratic way to select students for further schooling. In addition, data from the national large-scale assessment, NAPE, have been usefully employed to identify trends in student performance so as to develop interventions to raise the standards of student learning. NAPE data also have been used to address, and verify, public perceptions of reduced quality after implementation of Universal Primary Education. The demonstrated value of these data to inform the government and general population has both validated and institutionalized these assessment activities and highlighted their utility in educational planning and monitoring.

Curriculum reform. Curriculum reform is an important catalyst for assessment reform. The development of the 2007 Thematic Curriculum provided a strategic opportunity for implementing Uganda's continuous assessment program. Collaboration between the National Curriculum Development Centre and UNEB in developing aligned and integrated curriculum and assessment activities provided a more structured way to assist teachers in enhancing learner performance. Because curriculum and continuous assessment go hand-in-hand, their simultaneous development can result in the most effective coordination and implementation.

Every country's journey in constructing its assessment system will be unique. However, looking at others' experiences in building coherent and effective assessment systems allows countries to better understand the process and to learn from others' successes and challenges. Hopefully, the Ugandan experience will provide some helpful insights from which other countries can learn.

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This paper describes Uganda's journey in developing a coherent assessment system. The journey must be viewed in the context of the government's ongoing commitment to improving the quality of education and learning in its schools through the provision of better data on student performance. All key assessment activities in the country, namely examinations, large-scale assessments, and continuous classroom assessments, are formally mandated and institutionally supported. Key drivers for developing the assessment system in Uganda have included political stability and will, government commitment to key education policies and goals, having a single assessment institution, the institutionalized use of assessment data, and curriculum reform.

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