

Learning from Learning Assessments: The Politics and Policies of Attaining Quality Education

Roundtable Report

23 June, 2016

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies,
Geneva, Switzerland

Organized by NORRAG and Brookings' Center for Universal Education, in collaboration with
PASEC

This is a report of the roundtable proceedings, not an endorsement of any particular viewpoint presented by
participants, whose remarks are synthesized and reported as far as possible using their chosen terms and approaches.



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Agenda (in brief)

**Maison de la Paix, 2 Chemin Eugène-Rigot, Room S8
Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva**

Thursday 23rd June 2016:

09:00 – 09:10 Welcome address

Speaker: Joost Monks, NORRAG

09:10 – 09:30 Keynote address – Learning from learning assessments

Speaker: Esther Care, Center for Universal Education, Brookings

09:30 – 11:00 Plenary Session 1 – LMTF “learning champions”: what did they learn?

Moderator: Alexandra Draxler, Education and Development Consultant, and NORRAG

Speakers: Angel Kaliminwa, Examinations Council of Zambia, Mohammad Matar, Palestine Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Charles Kado, Kenya Primary School Headteachers’ Association

11:00 – 11:15 Coffee Break

11:15 – 12:45 Plenary Sessions 2 – PASEC and PISA for Development: Theory and Practice

Moderator: Camilla Addey, Humboldt University Berlin

Speakers: Pablo Zoido, OECD, Jacques Malpel, PASEC (via Skype), Oren Pizmony-Levy, Teachers College, Columbia University, Michel Carton, NORRAG

12:45 – 14:00 Lunch Break

14:00 – 15:15 Breakout sessions

Session 1 – The use of learning assessment data: policy perception and implications

Framing Remarks: Gita Steiner-Khamsi, Teachers College, Columbia University

Session 2 – Reflections on the assessments of different skills

Framing Remarks: Raymond Saner, Basel University and Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development

Session 3 – Learning Assessments and the SDGs

Framing Remarks: Patrick Montjourides, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and Kenneth King, NORRAG

15:15 – 15:30 Coffee Break

15:30 – 17:15 Plenary Session 3 - Assessing the Breadth of Learning

Moderator: Antoni Verger, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Speakers: Seamus Hegarty, Independent Consultant, Martin Henry, Education International, Kate Anderson, Center for Universal Education, Brookings

17:15 – 17:45 Wrap-up and Concluding Remarks

Speakers: Joost Monks, NORRAG, Esther Care, Center for Universal Education, Brookings

18:00 – 20:00 Cocktail

CONTEXT

Learning assessments have increasing influence for education policy-making and reform. In response to both the accomplishments and disappointments related to the Millennium Development Goals (2000 – 2015) and to the new aspirations under the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), there is global interest in the development and use of standards and indicators for learning achievement. This widespread use of assessments is based on the assumption that data can help strengthen accountability and guide policy to make education more efficient and equitable. However, assessment data are frequently either misused or do not positively influence policy-making or student learning. Moreover, international learning assessments are not a single, uniform tool. There are different and sometimes competing methods and objectives of international, regional and national assessments.

The **overarching questions** of the roundtable were, thus: Can the measurement of learning outcomes lead to improved quality education for all? If so, how?

Subsidiary questions included:

1. Do assessment regimes actually capture the information that they intend to?
2. How has the reliance on quantifying learning outcomes influenced – both positively and negatively – policy-making and policy delivery at the national and local level?
3. What are the experiences across national contexts, both in terms of positive outcomes and unintended consequences?
4. How do different large scale assessments, such as PASEC and PISA for Development, relate to one another and to the national context in terms of content and capacity?

How do initiatives such as the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF) - convened by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings - shed light on country needs and perspectives in this context?

INTRODUCTION

Following the introductory remarks delivered by Joost Monks, Esther Care presented key aspects and uses of learning assessments while cautioning that assessments have to be carefully constructed with the end use in mind, to provide information that is actionable. That means that assessments should not be sorting mechanisms but ones that discover what students have learnt and what progress they have made. Feedback has to be provided to both students and teachers. Large-scale assessments can teach us much about the equivalence or comparability of curricula, notably about the difficulties of making cross-country comparisons. They are also tools for building capacity for assessment, and for enhancing the pertinence and quality of curricula. A major challenge for policy makers is how to measure learning that is not exclusively knowledge-based, a theme to which participants returned repeatedly over the day.

PLENARY AND BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Plenary session 1 included presentations by three speakers from Kenya, Palestine and Zambia, countries that, as Learning Champions of the Learning Metrics Task Force, used its recommendations to develop new approaches to national assessments.

Kenya had recently expanded access to its education system but not improved the system's quality, demonstrating that while having pupils in classrooms is important, this alone is not enough to ensure learning. Kenya had two goals for its assessment system: to have harmonized, comprehensive tools to ensure access, learning, and competency development, and to eliminate uncoordinated assessments that served largely to rank students. Kenya built on previous work to create a tool to holistically measure the quality of schools and another tool to measure kindergarten readiness. The team felt it successfully developed new partnerships between civil society and government.

Palestine sought a shift from the paradigm of "assessment of learning" to "assessment *for and as* learning." The Assessment and Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Education adopted a new strategy for using data sets from the national and international large-scale assessments conducted in Palestine to focus on using the data to understand student learning. The main pillars of this utilization plan are:

1. a new reporting style for assessments' findings;
2. new analysis techniques for examining the data;
3. greater involvement of the community in discussing the results at the school, district, and national levels;
4. more policy-oriented research using assessment data at all three levels, and;
5. greater involvement of other stakeholders like media outlets, universities, donors, NGOs, and members of parliament.

Zambia has, similarly to Kenya, increased education access but not advanced quality. Zambia ranked 9th out of 10 countries in the recent Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) regional assessment. Children at the primary level especially have underperformed on learning assessment, and their poor levels of learning cascade into secondary school and their careers. To help counter the issue of education quality, the Learning Champions team in the Ministry of Education focused on continuous assessment across a number of different domains at the primary level, both to support teachers' knowledge of student performance and to provide opportunities to review what students are learning. Its status as Learning Champion enabled the team to rekindle a program that was previously donor-funded and obtain a government line budget for it.

From the presentations and the subsequent discussion, some common themes emerged:

1. Developing national assessments in collaboration with international experience and assessments has some significant advantages, notably the development in ministries of new analytical techniques and the capacity to use them, and also protection of ministry budgets for evaluation.
2. Reporting duties for international assessments can be quite heavy, and opportunity costs in terms of capture of existing capacity can be high in ministries that are already stretched.

3. The use of data and results for improving quality is frequently not significant enough, notably at local level where feedback to teachers and students is not adequate for improvements in practice.
4. Communication about processes and results is vital for educational personnel and learners, as well as for the general public. The public does not always see the link between national or international assessments and the development of responsive and pertinent education systems.
5. Ownership of assessments outside of ministries can be low: support for analyzing and using data does not necessarily match the effort that goes into creating and collecting data.
6. Large-scale assessments can result in an undesirable narrowing of curricula to correspond to the content of the assessments, i.e. “teaching for the test”.

Plenary Session 2 listened to presentations of the opportunities and challenges of some international and regional assessment models and a critical view of the role of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs). The OECD and its partners are implementing the **PISA for Development initiative** in support of the Education 2030 agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the experience of PISA already helping to measure and improve learning outcomes in over 70 countries, OECD and its partners are aiming to make it possible for a wider range of countries to participate in the assessment. Some of the main challenges relate to the infrastructure and to language issues. Although in many countries national examination results are improving, PISA results show that students may end the primary cycle without basic knowledge that will enable them to follow lower secondary programmes, to succeed in vocational training programmes or to enter work life. Results should have the outcome of a wider policy dialogue and it is important that measuring learning outcomes leads to actions that improve education systems.

The **Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems of the CONFEMEN (PASEC)**¹ enables thirteen countries to obtain comparative data and develop a common qualification framework. There are of course challenges in terms of stability of the basic teams, as well as the capacity to gather data, report on results, provide feedback and share with other countries. The 2014 results were not as positive as projected, and results are worrisome and critical in some countries. Despite regular and intense financial efforts from national authorities, families’ and development partners’ results are not matching expectations and challenges. The time lag of two years between assessments and their publications as well as the expense and effort involved means a sometimes difficult relationship between the hopes and the policy relevance of the exercises. Results dissemination is therefore crucial to take the most benefits from the assessment. How the information coming out of assessments is being used and contribute to education sector policy debate will determine political and social acceptance of such an investment.

The Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), an effort mainly financed by the countries themselves, is in a similar situation. The main drawback of SACMEQ is that results come out with an even more substantial time-lag, weakening their relevance for policy or classroom practice.

A historical and political overview of the prominent role of benchmarking in education presented by one participant revealed an important role for assessments spanning over fifty years. However, today’s assessments differ in that they are not implemented as a response to specific research questions. Important questions are usually asked after the data is collected, rather than a specific question/problem

¹ <http://www.pasec.confemen.org/>

informing the development of learning assessments, suggesting that causal analyses using assessment data is lacking.

The issue of unintended consequences of learning assessments (PISA for Development, in particular) was also raised. At the public level there is declining trust in education systems, on the one hand, and pressure from both users and business to turn to the private sector partially or wholly for solutions.

Another participant reminded the audience that quantification is the prerequisite for measurement and that, as a convention, has been usually considered as objective reality only by those who participate in and adhere to its use. For example, centralized state control has been based on statistics since the seventeenth century. The paradox is that despite a certain veneration of the value of measuring education outcomes, it must be recognised that higher test scores in reading, science, and math have not been correlated with higher economic growth during the second half of the twentieth century; this underlines the disconnect between the control function and the impact of assessments. Moreover, the epistemic community of education statistics and measurement is often quite remote from those who are the objects of measurement, leading to a mismatch of perceived/experienced realities between the communities of teachers and learners and the national/global communities of experts and businesses. In other words, the participant pointed out, we need to be cognisant that assessment data constitute a socio-political construct, carrying and promoting a latent ideology.

The subsequent discussion revealed the following themes and observations:

1. Regional assessments appear to have higher comparability and subsequent policy value than international ones because of the very large differences world-wide in intake (at secondary level), curriculum, and capacity to devise and implement the assessments.
2. The locus of responsibility and coordination for large-scale assessments has significant impact on their use.
3. There is insufficient attention to the negative consequence of international comparisons for public confidence in education systems, as well as the opportunity costs for classrooms.
4. There is a fundamental ideological difference between those who believe that everything that matters can be quantified and those who believe that quantification of the education process itself is an ideology and therefore both subjective and insufficiently robust.
5. Large-scale assessments are weak tools for changing what happens in classrooms. We lack evidence of their effectiveness in this regard.
6. Education policy is a part of public policy writ large. Learning outcomes do not tell us enough about the factors that produce these outcomes, including diversity of mother tongue, socio-economic circumstances and broader infrastructure.
7. Assessments will not go away, and the task of those who are hoping to formulate and influence policy is to help make them as pertinent, high quality and cost effective as they can be.

Breakout session 1 was tasked with reflecting on the use and misuse of large-scale assessments.

The group reported back that three overarching themes framed the discussions:

1. how to ensure that data from external assessments is as directly digestible and meaningful to teachers and learners as possible;
2. how technology can better help ensure both the usefulness and dissemination of data;

3. what has been replaced or lost by the growing influence of learning assessments.

The discussion elaborated on some of the negative effects of large-scale data collection through individual assessments, notably:

1. the lack of buy-in by the general public and many educators;
2. the weak support among education personnel for perpetual reform;
3. teaching practice that engages the teachers as central and responsible actors and the inevitability of over-standardization of teaching and learning that is a consequence of large-scale assessments.

It was observed that often the results of large-scale assessments are conditioned by factors that teachers are powerless to change, yet the burden of change is perceived to be their responsibility.

Practical examples were given of the usefulness of assessments, in terms of helping identify good practice, model schools, improved collaboration and information-sharing, and curriculum adaptation in response to assessment results.

Breakout session 2 was tasked with reflecting on the assessments of skills.

Skills are mentioned but not spelled out explicitly in the SDGs. The session's overarching themes were that of the increasing economic value placed on learning as well as the commercialization of the process, on the one hand, and the uncertain understanding of what competence consists of. In that framework, the discussion noted that while assessing competences may seem appealing, the ability to apply competence in a work situation is difficult to assess.

Breakout session 3 was tasked with the relationship between learning assessments and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The overarching theme in this group was the outcome-oriented nature of the SDGs, including the globally-agreed indicators and the optional thematic indicators for education. Without developing more qualitative indicators that focus on processes, it will always be difficult to determine the underlying systemic reasons of inequality in education delivery and learning outcomes. While indicators are inherently reductionist in nature, the education-related indicators of the SDGs are very narrowly focused, leading to problems of translation into achieving the broad goals. The learning landscape that relates to these goals is much broader than what is contained in SDG 4.

The **UNESCO Institute for Statistics** has launched the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML) to facilitate coordinated global and national actions to measure learning as a response to the Education 2030 agenda. GAML is designed to achieve a set of interrelated goals, broadly focusing on:

1. ensuring technically sound and reliable approaches to measuring learning;
2. developing innovative methodologies to measure learning outcomes;
3. strengthening country, regional, and global capacity to implement reliable measurement of learning;
4. strengthening national, regional, and global capacities to implement reliable measures of learning.

While a common agenda has been outlined for SDG 4, GAML's activities are likely to vary based on the target, as the measurement of learning is more developed for some targets than others. A clear value of

GAML will be the ability to share innovations in measurement across all targets. Taken as a whole, GAML represents a critically-needed platform for promoting measurement of learning. GAML will prioritize the inclusion of diverse voices on the measurement of learning, drawing on existing expertise and successful coalitions of existing research initiatives, researchers, and stakeholders for the global North and South.

The group cautioned against accepting a trend that will accept making an industry out of assessments in response to the SDGs, rather suggesting making better use of the data that already exists. Strengthening national capacity to implement different kinds of assessments – as indicated by the Learning Assessment Capacity Index (LACI) – is one possible way forward.

Plenary session 3 looked at the question of breadth of learning, and invited participants to provide feedback on a plan in gestation at the Center for Universal Education to look at curriculum statements and plans world-wide in order to develop a concept map that to some extent describes three levels of curriculum: intended, implemented and received.

The **Breadth of Learning** project is focused on students' opportunity to learn, not their learning outcomes. It is not concerned with assessment but with the learning environment. The project builds on the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), which has already highlighted the poor state of learning outcomes in many countries and prioritized tailored solutions at the national level. It also helped shift the conversation from the usual narrow focus only on literacy and numeracy outcomes, to a broader focus on learning across seven domains: physical well-being, social and emotional, culture and arts, literacy and communication, learning approaches and cognition, numeracy and mathematics, and science and technology.

It seeks to provide insight into students' learning experiences by developing tools that gather data on the learning opportunities to which students are exposed, from the classroom level to national policies. These tools will include a mapping of national curricula and policies around what students are supposed to learn, followed by school- and classroom-level questionnaires of the actual learning experiences. It is hoped that the information will be used by governments, teachers, and other education stakeholders to examine the alignment within the system and target resources to improving implementation of the curriculum. The framework is currently undergoing consultation and will be piloted in a small number of countries in late 2016/early 2017.

The teachers' tool will be developed by teachers themselves and will give them the opportunity to measure the breadth of learning available to their students and the support available to them to deliver this.

The new initiative can help highlight important gaps between what is meant to be learned by students and what is actually learned – an important first step.

While there might be a global consensus on the importance of learning as such, there is no consensus on what indicators to focus on, nor the willingness to track learning opportunities globally. As always, the danger is overlooking the differences and nuances at the local level in terms of education curricula and policies. Different aspects of the breadth of learning might be emphasized to varying degrees in different national settings. By focusing on the breadth of learning across different levels, attention is detracted from focusing on the depth of learning in specific areas which might be more indicative of certain learning outcomes.

The discussion revealed the diversity of experiences and approaches of the participants. Most participants agreed both that breadth of learning is made more fragile by widespread testing of “core” subjects, and that external evaluation is seen, often rightly, by education personnel as a punitive, competitive and segregationist process. On the other hand, teachers sometimes apply the same competitive and segregationist procedures in their own classrooms.

Many questions were asked about the possible relationship between these new processes and on-going efforts at IBE, OECD and elsewhere, as well as the appetite of countries to commit resources to additional activities similar to what is already on the table.

CONCLUSIONS

The meeting concluded with the hope that the rich one-day dialogue could be continued, perhaps looking into the practical implications of some of the main themes.

Much of the debate over learning assessments, in addition, can be boiled down to whether actors believe social phenomena can be objectively quantified, or whether such quantifications are overly reductionist and/or subjectively biased. Roundtable participants generally agreed that assessments must be carefully constructed with a specific objective in sight; they are only a means to end, not ends in and of themselves.

The overarching question was unsurprisingly not answered conclusively. However, the discussion highlighted some of both the benefits and drawbacks of large-scale learning assessments and pointed out that a consensus can be found in the need for careful needs identification, nuanced approaches, and tailored responses. As country cases indicated, improving education system quality has not been necessarily correlated with the increasing use of assessments. Part of the reason could be the acknowledged gap between assessment results and practical improvements in the classroom. The lack of local, national and regional capacity to implement assessments effectively is another contributing factor.

APPENDIX: List of Participants

Organisation	Name
Aga Khan Foundation, Switzerland	Alison Joyner - Education Programme Officer
AMMACHI Labs, Amrita University, India	Rao. R. Bhavani - Director
Atelier de Recherche sur l'Éducation au Burkina Faso, Burkina Faso	Amado Kaboré - NORRAG Research Assistant
Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain	Antoni Verger – Associate Professor, Department of Sociology
Center for Researching Education and Labour (REAL), University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa	Peliwe Lolwana – Associate Visiting Professor, and Director of REAL/NORRAG Collaborative Programme in South Africa
Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development, Switzerland	Raymond Saner – Founding Director, and Professor at Basel University Lichia Yiu – President
Center for Universal Education, Brookings	Kate Anderson - Project Director, Global Economy and Development Esther Care - Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development Joshua Muskin - Non-Resident Senior Fellow
Education International, Belgium	Martin Henry – Research Coordinator
Enfants du Monde, Switzerland	Nicole Awais – Education and Training Specialist Fabienne Lagier – Secrétaire Générale Adjointe
Examinations Council of Zambia, Zambia	Angel Kaliminwa – Principal Examinations Specialist
Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, France	William Smith – Senior Project Officer Research
Humboldt University, Germany	Camilla Addey – Post-Doctoral Researcher
Independent Consultant	Seamus Hegarty
Institute of International and Comparative Education, Zhejiang Normal University, China	Xiulan Wan – Deputy Director Yuting Zhang – Lecturer
International Olympic Committee, Switzerland	Elizabeth Sluyter-Mathew – Project Manager
NORRAG Team	Michel Carton – Executive Director Alexandra Draxler – Senior Advisor

	<p>Velibor Jakovleski – Project and Research Officer</p> <p>Kenneth King – NORRAG News Editor</p> <p>Pravina King – NORRAG</p> <p>Joost Monks – Managing Director</p> <p>Rob Palmer – NORRAG NEWSBite Editor</p> <p>Radu Barza – Trainee and MA Candidate in International Economics</p>
Open Society Foundations, UK	Hugh McLean – Director, Education Support Programme
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), France	Pablo Zoido – Technical Lead, PISA for Development
Palestine Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Palestine	Mohammed Matar - Director of Assessment and Evaluation
Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs de la CONFEMEN (PASEC), Senegal	Jacques Malpel - Programme Coordinator
Robert Bosch Academy, Germany	Sarah Fichtner – Research Fellow
Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, UAE	Natasha Ridge – Executive Director
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland	<p>Marie Brüning – Programme Officer, West Africa Division and Education Theme</p> <p>Laetitia Houlmann – Consultant SDC Education Network</p>
Teachers College, Columbia University, USA	<p>Oren Pizmony-Levy - Assistant Professor of International and Comparative Education</p> <p>Gita Steiner-Khamsi - Professor of International and Comparative Education</p>
Teachers Service Commission and Kenya Primary School Headteachers' Association, Kenya	Charles Kado – Head Teacher
UNESCO, France	Margarete Sachs-Israel - Programme Specialist, Division for Education 2030
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), Germany	Kim Suehye – Programme Specialist
UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Canada	Patrick Montjourides – Programme Specialist
UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), France	Mioko Saito - Programme Specialist and Gender Focal Point
United Nations Institute for	Brook Boyer - Manager, Monitoring and Evaluation Section

Training and Research (UNITAR), Switzerland	
University of Bristol, UK	Tore Sorensen – Doctoral Candidate
University of Sussex, UK	Mario Novelli – Professor and Deputy Director, Centre for International Education, and NORRAG Scientific Advisor

ABOUT THE REPORT AND THE AUTHORS

This paper is a distillation of the main points raised during the Roundtable on “Learning from Learning Assessments: The Politics and Policies of Attaining Quality Education” which was held on 23 June in Geneva, Switzerland. All views made in this report relate to the interventions made during the roundtable. They do not necessarily reflect the specific views of the authors, NORRAG, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, PASEC or any other individuals or organisations that attended or were represented at the roundtable.

Alexandra Draxler is Senior Advisor at NORRAG. She spent many years at UNESCO, including as the Executive Secretary of Delors Commission (1993-1996), and continues to work as an independent consultant for public and private entities. She is a member of several professional associations and is an Associate Editor of the International Journal of Educational Development.

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Acknowledgement is due to Kate Anderson and Esther Care from the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, Michel Carton and Joost Monks from NORRAG, and to the Speakers and Moderators for their comments and contributions.

How to cite this report:

NORRAG. 2016. *Learning from Learning Assessments: The Politics and Policies of Attaining Quality Education*. Roundtable Report. Geneva: NORRAG. Retrieved from:

http://www.norrag.org/fileadmin/Workshop_Reports/Learning_from_Learning_Assessments_Roundtable_Report_June_2016.pdf

ABOUT NORRAG

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