

**Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria  
(ESSPIN)**

**Approach to monitoring learning achievement –  
Position Paper**

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

CSACEFA	Civil Society Action Coalition on Education For All
DFID	Department For International Development
EFA	Education For All
ESSPIN	Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria
FME	Federal Ministry of Education
GEP	Girls Education Project
JSCE	Junior Secondary Certificate Examination
MLA	Monitoring Learning Achievements
NAEQA	National Agency for Education Quality Assurance
SACMEQ	Southern Africa Committee for Monitoring Learning Achievements
UBEC	Universal Basic Education Commission
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund

## Introduction

1. Nigeria participated in the UNESCO-UNICEF Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) project in 1996 and 2003. To the extent that the results were comparable between Nigeria and other African countries, the performance of Nigerian students was the weakest in the continent. A picture of general poor performance was confirmed in a survey in 2007 for the DFID-funded, UNICEF-managed Girls' Education Project (GEP), which used a slight variation of the 2003 MLA test instruments.
2. Despite the fact that the MLA project also aimed to build capacity, no institutional mechanism was set up to monitor learning achievement on a systematic basis. Given the concerns about the quality of learning outcomes, the Federal and State governments need to establish a national assessment system that can provide reliable information on literacy and numeracy trends to guide policy and inform practice in the classroom and in teacher education institutions. Indeed, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) Roadmap (*March 2009*) has identified the establishment of "a standardized assessment system that annually monitors and reports academic achievement in the core subjects" as one of its priorities.
3. In this context, this paper outlines, in a preliminary way, the ESSPIN approach to the development of a national assessment system for monitoring learning achievement. The approach will be further developed by the Task Specialist who is currently (May 2009) beginning work.
4. The focus of this paper is on the relatively narrow issue of establishing a national system for summative assessment ('assessment of learning') to monitor the relevant EFA learning goal. The broader issue of formative assessment ('assessment for learning') is addressed in the position papers on education quality and inspection. No references are made either to the use of assessment for selection and certification (i.e. State examinations, such as the JSCE).

## Basic principles

5. ESSPIN will support the establishment of a national assessment system that will serve the following purposes:
  - Assess student numeracy and literacy learning outcomes in basic education.
  - Enable robust comparisons of results over time by ensuring that the assessment instruments originate from a pool of questions that have been generated using the same principles.
  - Enable comparisons of results across States.
  - Feed into robust analyses that lead to policy recommendations for decision makers and education practitioners by combining the assessment results with supplementary information on:

- basic school characteristics, preferably through integration with annual school census data;
  - basic individual characteristics, such as sex, age, education history, and – if possible – parental characteristics such as their education levels.
  - Inform the general public on progress made towards achieving the EFA goals.
  - Build national capacity in assessment through sustainable funding by national sources.
6. To achieve these objectives, the system should be sample-based and tested over a long pilot phase in the ESSPIN States before it can be rolled out at the national level.
  7. Coordination should be ensured with any ESSPIN State initiatives. For example, Kwara State has a system of assessment since 2008 to monitor the results of the Every Child Counts campaign.
  8. The national assessment system should build links with regional initiatives (such as SACMEQ and PASEC) and other national systems in Africa to learn from their experience and adopt those features that have worked best. This may also help prepare Nigeria to eventually participate in an assessment initiative that enables international comparisons. However, the international comparability dimension should not become a priority, as it could overburden the fledgling system.

## Operational issues

9. In the process of establishing a national assessment system, decisions need to be made over the following operational issues.

## Stewardship

10. A national learning assessment system, and in particular the implementing agency of that system, needs to be given policy guidance by a high-level body. In Nigeria, a steering committee at the Federal level would, as a minimum, comprise the Federal Ministry of Education, the Universal Basic Education Commission and the implementing agency as members. All participating States (or regions) and all types of schools (public, private and integrated) should also be represented. A wide range of stakeholder agencies can also be considered ranging from organisations with relevant expertise to a civil society umbrella organisation like CSACEFA.
11. The purpose of the steering committee will be to provide overall guidance to the implementing agency, in particular the key policy questions which the system needs to answer. The steering committee will need to ensure that these policy questions are captured in the design of the system. It is important to maintain clear expectations about the questions that can and cannot be answered.

## Implementing agency

12. A key question is which Federal level institution might take central stage in hosting and developing a national learning assessment system. Officials from the Department of Policy, Planning, Management and Research (PPM&R) at the FME had participated in the implementation of the UNESCO-UNICEF MLA project. However, it is not clear whether the PPM&R has the capacity to conduct a national exercise on its own given that it has not been active since 2003 and it is not adequately funded at the moment. ESSPIN will engage with the PPM&R more closely to determine its capacity and make plans to develop this further if necessary.
13. Alternatively, the new Quality Assurance Department in the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) could be considered as an implementing agency.
14. Finally, among the FME Roadmap proposals on quality assurance, it is envisaged that the following institutions will be set up: a National Steering Committee (which could play the stewardship role outlined in the previous section) and a National Agency for Education Quality Assurance (NAEQA) (which could be the role of the implementing agency). Implementation of these actions has not yet begun but there are clear opportunities for ESSPIN to engage with and assist in this. However, the creation of NAEQA will take time, whereas the need for learning achievement baseline information is more immediate for both ESSPIN and its partner States.

## Main focus

15. During the course of ESSPIN (2008-2014), it is envisaged that the national assessment system will have the following key characteristics:
  - It will be sample-based and will not attempt to survey all schools.
  - Representative sub-samples of private and integrated islamiyya schools need to be included.
  - Two subjects (English and mathematics) will be tested.
  - Although this is a common problem in many African countries, it is likely that a particular cause of poor performance of students in the MLA project in Nigeria was the weak command of English, which is spoken only by a minority of children at home. Careful consideration should therefore be given to the possibility of extending literacy testing in the three other national languages (at least for some students) aiming for comparability with the test in English literacy.
  - The survey will be repeated every two or three years. There should be a pilot survey in the school year 2009-2010 in ESSPIN States only. In general, as learning outcomes do not change rapidly in a population, it is recommended that the survey is repeated every three years. However, there might be some argument in increasing the frequency to every two years at the initial stage so that a survey is conducted at the ESSPIN States

both in 2009-2010 and in 2011-2012 before it is rolled out at the national level during the last year of ESSPIN in 2013-2014.

- Grade 4 will be tested. In addition, one or two other grades will be included. Which additional grades are selected may be determined by the frequency of the exercise in order to introduce the possibility that individual students can be followed up in subsequent years. For example, if the survey takes place every three years, it may make sense to include Grade 7 so that the students who took the test in Grade 4 can be tracked and tested again.
- A representative sample of schools of participating States should be tested, including non-government schools.
- All students of the focus grades who are present on the day of the assessment should be tested, i.e. there should not be any limits on the maximum number of students that should be tested from each school.
- Care should be taken to ensure that the survey is scheduled to take place consistently at a specified time during the school year to ensure representative and policy relevant results. Arguments in favour of the beginning, the middle or the end of the year need to be discussed and agreed.

### Test development

16. At the centre of the system, there needs to be a solid framework describing the expected learning outcomes whose achievement will be assessed. The framework will also need to define in a clear way how observed performance will be interpreted to assess whether learning objectives have been achieved. This will help improve transparency and understanding among stakeholders.
17. Decisions need to be made over the nature and format of the test. National assessment surveys tend to use overwhelmingly multiple choice questions to ease processing and lower costs, but due consideration needs to be given to the inclusion of open ended questions. The extent to which the questions are based on the National Curriculum or on more generic competencies needs to be considered.
18. The implementing agency should include both academics and practitioners in the team responsible for test development. A common failing is that tests are too difficult or too detached from the school context and, consequently, the results do not reflect students' true potential.
19. The development of questionnaire items should not be approached as a one-off exercise, but with a view to establishing a databank of items that all assess the achievement of the same set of cognitive skills. This will enable a trend to be reliably established in subsequent years.



20. The instruments need to be piloted in a representative range of school environments. In the past, for cost efficiency reasons, instruments have only been piloted in a limited number of schools in the federal capital territory area, which is unlikely to be representative. The results need to display a satisfactory distribution across each type of school (e.g. public vs. private or urban vs. rural) that differentiates achievement between types of cognitive skills. The recent study under the Girls Education Project displayed very limited variation and did not lend itself easily to analysis.

### Test administration and management

21. The administration of tests is a delicate process. It needs to overcome communication barriers, which on the one hand may predispose students negatively toward the assessment process or, on the other hand, may not convey the high stakes involved in measuring achievement accurately. Procedural guidelines outlining quality control measures will need to be prepared in the form of a manual. In line with these guidelines, sufficient provisions need to be made to train those who will administer tests.
22. Particular care will need to be taken with the confidentiality of instruments. Whether the survey needs to also maintain confidentiality over the sample and the timing of the survey will depend on the relative advantage of collecting information in advance and making organisational arrangements from sampled schools versus the authenticity gains from an unannounced visit.
23. Explicit and timely provisions need to be made in the budget of the Federal government and/or State governments. If State governments are also to contribute financially, then clear rules will need to be in place on how to share costs before new States can take part in the system. The steering committee should take the lead in deciding whether costs should be shared and what rules should be set.

### Analysis, reporting, dissemination and communication

24. Outreach to the main stakeholders will be managed through a careful reporting and dissemination strategy using lessons from a growing international experience.

### Next steps

25. The establishment of the system depends entirely on government endorsement and subsequent support. ESSPIN therefore proposes the following steps with a n objective of organising the pilot assessment survey in ESSPIN States during school year 2009-2010:
- Mobilise a task specialist on monitoring learning achievement (May 2009)
  - Initiate a discussion at the Federal/ESSPIN State level (and other national stakeholders) on strategies for creation of a national assessment system (May-July 2009). This will be facilitated by the Task Specialist (learning assessment), in cooperation with the Roadmap implementation team and with support by the Federal Team Leader and the

Task Specialist (M&E). The outcome will be a draft action plan guiding the decisions that need to be taken in terms of establishing a steering committee and selecting an implementing agency.

- ESSPIN will help facilitate a forum to invite the main Federal/national-level stakeholders and representatives of the ESSPIN States (September 2009).

26. The development of systems for monitoring learning achievement and the creation of NAEQA are still embryonic and the volume of inputs to be provided by ESSPIN can only be crudely estimated until further investigations and discussions have taken place. These issues will be taken forward by the task specialist (learning assessment) who will guide the overall technical approach both at the Federal level and the States. Upon the recommendations of the task specialist (learning assessment), an action plan including an outline of necessary technical assistance to support systems and capacity for assessment surveys on a regular basis, will be developed by September.

27. The task specialist (learning assessment) will engage with ESSPIN States to pilot a learning assessment survey during the school year 2009-10. As the system develops, ESSPIN will, if requested, assist variously with the development of legislation, set-up, structure and systems for NAEQA, and with the conduct of a national learning assessment survey in subsequent years.