CHALLENGES OF ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment and Certification pose a lot of challenges on an Examination body in the quest to maintain quality and ensure standards. In Zambia, assessment plays three main roles in the education system. The roles are Monitoring of learning achievement at middle basic level, the Certification at Grades 7, 9 and 12 and for selection process to Grades 8 and 10 and for tertiary education. This paper discusses the challenges the education system in Zambia faces in the areas of Assessment and Certification as they relate to access for higher education.

The deterioration in the national economy in the 1970s and 80s due to the fall in copper prices resulted in reduction in funding for social sectors including education. The decline in education was manifested in dearth of teaching and learning materials and infrastructure dilapidation. The decline in education standard set the context for establishing the Basic Education Sub-sector Investment Programme (BESSIP) in 1999. BESSIP objective was to improve quality and relevance of basic education. A national assessment survey of the education system became necessary. The first national assessment survey was conducted in 1999.

IMPROVING EDUCATION QUALITY

The National Assessment programme was inaugurated as part of the broader BESSIP programme to obtain information that is used for making decisions about pupils, teachers, curricula and educational policy.

The intention of the Ministry was to make the National Assessment programme an integral component of education delivery, as a monitoring and evaluation strategy of various interventions. The National Assessment will be conducted regularly while focusing on critical levels as times demand. The assessment was to form one of the corner-stone activities in the generation of especially quality indicators.

A national assessment differs from an end-of-cycle examination, in a number of ways. Firstly, national assessment tests are administered in the education system at some grade that is chosen for the purpose and not necessarily at the end of a cycle.

Secondly, the tests are not administered to every pupil in the system or even in a school, but only to a sample of pupils from a sample of schools. Thirdly, test scores are reported and interpreted at the group level such as nationally, provincially, by rural/urban, by gender. The results are not reported at the individual level of the pupil or even of the school even though both are possible. Fourthly, national assessment tests generally do not extend to all subject areas, but are usually confined to key areas, such as language, mathematics and science. Finally, unlike end-of-cycle examinations, a national assessment survey is not conducted every year, but at intervals. In Zambia the National Assessment Survey is conducted every other year.

Available statistics at the inauguration of the National Assessment Programme in Zambia showed the level of the problem. The statistics showed that there were 1 506 650 pupils of which 787 606 were boys and 719 044 were girls enrolled in 4 058 government and grant aided primary schools.

On the other hand, 657 000 children of which 329 000 and 329 000 were boys and girls respectively aged between 7 – 13 years were not enrolled in school. Girls enrolment lagged significantly behind that of boys especially in three provinces.

On the pupil learning achievement level the principal findings were that learning achievement levels at Grade 5 were somewhat low. The National Assessment tests are in literacy, numeracy and Zambian language.

The mean percentage score in English and Mathematics were 33.42 and 35.74 respectively. The 2001 results in English and Mathematics were somewhat higher than in 1999 and the percentage stood at 33.20 and 34.30 respectively. There was marginal decline in performance in Silozi from 43.3 to 39.22 while performance in Icibemba declined in Northern province from 39.1 to 38.7 and improved in Luapula province from 38.8 to 40.5.

The recommendation of the first two national assessment surveys have widely been used to influence investments options and other focused interventions at various levels of the education system. One such intervention is the competence tests at Grade 4 literacy in English, numeracy and local language. The development of the Grade 4 Basic Competence tests was one of the strategies that were undertaken as a measure of ensuring that all children were satisfactorily acquiring the basic competencies. The Grade 4 Basic Competence tests were therefore intended;

- To improve the quality of education through improving the performances by pupils on the essential competences in numeracy and literacy.

- The Grade 4 level was selected because it marked the end of lower Basic School Education. At this level it was expected that the children should be able to exhibit the basic competencies in numeracy and literacy.

- Due to the public concern about the low levels of learning achievement exhibited by the children in the primary schools, it became necessary to specify and clarify the basic competencies that the children were expected to attain at the end of 4 years of education. Specifying the competencies was essential for ensuring accurate measurement.

- After specifying or clarifying the competencies, there was need to develop tests that teachers could use to determine whether the competencies were being attained or not.

- The tests would provide an opportunity to redirect the teachers' focus of education to its essence-good teaching and learning.

- The tests were expected to provide a mechanism for identifying the learning difficulties that had gone unidentified and unattended to so that remedial teaching could be undertaken immediately.

- The Ministry of Education wanted the Grade 4 Basic Competence tests programme to serve as a model of the school-based assessment programme.

GENDER AND EQUITY IN EXAMINATIONS

The Ministry of Education has adopted the policy of positive discrimination intended to increase girls access to education. All children who enroll into school in grade 1 are supposed to continue education until they reach Grade 9. The practice is to the contrary due to limited school places at Grade 8. There is therefore a selection examination at Grade 7 used to select pupils to proceed to Grade 8 to take up the few available places. The rest drop out and stop attending government and government grant aid schools

2002 GRADE 7 EXAMINATION

- 93 653 number of Grade 8 places
- 187 307 number who sat Grade 7 examination
- 105 118 number of boys who sat
- 82 189 number of girls who sat

The examination results for the Grade 7 examination is arranged in two order of merit distributions. One distribution is for girls and the other one is for boys. Girls in other words compete for their own places and so are the boys.

- 47 266 available places for boys
- 46 387 available places for girls

2002 Selection Results

- 47 266 boys selected to Grade 8
- 46 387 girls selected to Grade 8

The objective is that eventually the number of available places will be the same for boys and girls. In other words, the progression rate to Grade 8 for both boys and girls will be the same.

The selection procedure to Grade 10 is similar to that for Grade 8. The objective is also the same to have the same progression rate to Grade 10 for both boys and girls.

2002 GRADE 9 EXAMINATION

- 32 873 number of Grade 10 places
- 123 483 number who sat the Grade 9 examination
- 66 363 number of boys who sat
- 57 120 number of girls who sat
- 17 489 number of boys selected to Grade 10
- 15 384 number of girls selected to Grade 10

CONCLUSION

The progression rate at both Grade 7 and Grade 9 for both boys and girls is still low and many pupils fail to go to the next level. In 2003 the Ministry of Education is implementing the Education Sector Plan which among others, will place priority on improved access and improved quality and efficiency in school and tertiary education. As regards national assessment and competence testing, the challenge is that of capacity building for teachers in schools so that they are equipped with skills to enable them to use assessment as a teaching tool for monitoring learning achievement as well as to provide information on pupil learning difficulties for the teacher to take necessary remedial teaching.

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