

ESTABLISHING NEW ASSESSMENT STANDARDS IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria adopted a National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in response to the global reforms in the social and economic context. The critical elements of NEEDS are value re-orientation, poverty reduction, wealth generation, job creation and using education to empower the people in order to achieve all these. In the education context, Nigeria has embarked in far reaching school reforms. Particularly for the pre-tertiary level, a 9 – year free basic education has been adopted with corresponding re-structuring of the subject offerings and ongoing reforms in the school curriculum. The selective external examination for admission from the 6-year primary school into the 3-year junior secondary school has been scrapped. A Basic Education Certificate will be awarded at the end of the 9-year continuous schooling. The education contents are being tailored to ensure acquisition of life-long strategic work skills and appropriate value orientation while ensuring a strong support for functional academic competencies. These curriculum reform measures have thrown new challenges for setting new assessment standards. This paper proposes a strategic framework for establishing these standards.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

At the 31st IAEA Conference, we had shown (Obioma 2005) how educational assessment should respond to educational reforms. We had also stated that in response to world global reforms in the social and economic context, Nigeria adopted a National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) in 2004. One of the key drivers of NEEDS is the concurrent reform in education in such a way that education will be used to empower the people and achieve the major targets of NEEDS which are: value re-orientation, poverty reduction, job creation and wealth generation. In this paper we shall demonstrate in specific terms and in the context of basic education how Nigeria has restructured its school curriculum which will take effect from September 2006. These reform measures have thrown new challenges to establishing new

assessment standards. A national framework for inducing quality assurance in these assessment standards is proposed.

WHAT IS NIGERIA'S RESPONSE TO GLOBAL EMERGING GOALS IN THE EDUCATION CONTEXT?

The World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 reaffirmed the Universal right to education, promoting an expanded vision of basic education with a renewed commitment to ensure that basic learning needs of children, youth and adults are met in all countries. In this context the relationship between educational policies and economic development was explicitly brought under focus. Thus, failure to fulfill the universal rights to education was situated in a broader context on the threat of economic stagnation and decline, rapid population growth, and widening economic disparities among and within nations (UNESCO, 2001).

In response to the global initiatives in particular the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (EFA), Nigeria adopted the 9-year Universal Basic Education programme (UBE). This was backed up by an ACT of Parliament in 2004 which led to the establishment of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). The 9 year Basic Education Programme is free and compulsory and geared to achieving the relevant targets of MDG, EFA and NEEDS. Thus a number of new policies and initiatives have emerged (Obioma,2005) as highlighted below:

- The integration of primary and junior secondary schools (JSS) into a continuous system of schooling;
- The proposed vocationalisation of the 3-year post basic education (senior secondary school (SSS));
- The development of relevant curriculum for the 9-yr continuous basic education;

- The planned review of the SSS curriculum in the context of the envisaged vocationalisation of post basic education;
- The restructured school curricula at the basic and post basic levels will take account of emerging issues;
- Review of school texts in the context of these reform measures;
- Planned use of ICT to enhance learning and teaching;
- The abolition of the present selection and screening examination into JSS;
- Building the capacity of school teachers in new ways of teaching and in the context of the new curricula specifications;
- A planned shift from undue emphasis on paper qualification to actual performance on tasks.

HOW HAS NIGERIA RESTRUCTURED ITS SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 9-YEAR BASIC EDUCATION?

The major basis for the reform in the school curriculum in the context of the 9-year basic education lies in eliminating the disconnect between the primary and JSS, defining the philosophy of basic education and reviewing and realigning the curriculum contents of primary and JSS into a continuous whole. In the process of reviewing and realigning the curriculum contents emerging issues in values, morals, peace, environment HIV/AIDS and entrepreneurial skills were infused using relevant extant subjects as carriers. Adult and non-formal education component, the education of out of school youths; etc. which were not given the deserved attention (UNESCO, 1998) has now been taken care of. The National Council on Education which is the highest Education Policy making body has approved this major shift (Federal Ministry of Education, 2006).

The curriculum now focuses on strategic basic contents for the achievement of the country's reform initiatives in value-orientation, poverty eradication, and wealth generation and job creation. Box I presents the new subject structure.

BOX I: BASIC EDUCATION STRUCTURE

BASIC EDUCATION LEVELS	CORE COMPULSORY SUBJECTS	ELECTIVE SUBJECTS
LOWER BASIC (Primary 1-3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. English Language 2. One Nigerian Language (L₁ or LIC) 3. Mathematics 4. Basic Science and Technology 5. Social Studies 6. Cultural & Creative Arts (CCA) 7. The Religions (CRK/IRK) 8. Physical & Health Education (PHE) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Computer Education* 2. Agriculture 3. Home Economics 4. Arabic Language <p><u>Note:</u> Must offer 1 elective, but not more than 2.</p>
UPPER BASIC (Primary 4–6)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. English Language 2. One Nigerian Language (L₁ or LIC) 3. Mathematics 4. Basic Science and Technology 5. Social Studies 6. Cultural & Creative Arts (CCA) 7. The Religions (CRK/IRK) 8. Physical & Health Education (PHE) 9. French Language. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Computer Education 2. Agriculture 3. Home Economics 4. Arabic Language <p><u>Note:</u> Must offer 1 elective, but not more than 3.</p>
UPPER BASIC (JSS 1 – 3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. English Language 2. One Nigerian Language (L₁ or LIC) 3. Mathematics 4. Basic Science 5. Social Studies 6. Cultural & Creative Arts (CCA) 7. The Religions (CRK/IRK) 8. Physical & Health Education (PHE) 9. French Language 10. Basic Technology 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Computer Education 2. Agriculture 3. Home Economics 4. Arabic Language 5. Business Studies <p><u>Note:</u> Must offer 1 elective, but not more than 3.</p>

*At the curriculum writing workshop in March 2006, subject and curriculum specialists recommended that Computer Studies be included as one of the core compulsory subjects.

WHAT ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NEW CURRICULUM STRUCTURE?

Prior to this subject restructuring, primary school pupils in Nigeria were required to take as much as 14 subject listings while their counterparts at the JSS level were subjected to as much as 17 subjects. In many instances there were duplications and gaps which have been eliminated or closed:

1. Pupils who studied Social Studies also studied Government and Civics.
2. While some pupils elected to study Music and Drama as separate subjects, they were also required to study Cultural and Creative Arts.
3. Basic Technology was introduced into the primary school curriculum as a basis for not only laying the foundation for the study of the subject in higher levels but also to get pupils imbibe the culture of applications of Science at the rudimentary stage. This was the case hither to.
4. French language is now compulsory. Previously this not the case.
5. Positive values and entrepreneurial skills are infused into the relevant carrier subjects to make learning more functional and also meet the noble ideals of NEEDS.
6. HIV/AIDS, Peace and the Environment are now critical aspects of school curriculum.

WHAT NEW CHALLENGES HAVE THESE CURRICULUM REFORMS THROWN TO ESTABLISHING NEW ASSESSMENT STANDARDS?

Assessment of students learning has remained the centerpiece of many educational reforms. Results from the assessment of students learning provide information about the educational progress of learners in a systematic way. Thus as reforms in education especially those that affect curriculum contents progress, the new assessment standards need to be established. In the particular case of Nigeria and indeed developing countries that are reforming their school curricula, assessment standards should depart from the narrow perspectives of immediate school outcomes to include wider expected functional performance of learners after a determined level of schooling.

School curriculum reforms in the 9-year Basic Education in Nigeria have brought to fore such challenges as:

1. What assessment standards should be established for the acquisition of productive work skills in relation to poverty reduction, job generation and wealth creation?
2. What assessment standards should be defined for imbibing of positive cultural values?
3. Should the acquisition of positive Cultural values be examinable and/or should it be a condition for certification?
4. How do we assess pupil learning outcomes in Basic Technology in the Lower Basic (primaries 1-3) and Middle Basic (primaries 4-6)?
5. What nature of assessment standards should be established for Family Life HIV/AIDS Education (FLHE), Peace Education, Values Education and Healthy Environment? Should there be certification in these areas?

6. With abolition of the selective entrance examinations for purposes of placing pupils into JSS, what will be the basis for progression from Middle Basic to Upper Basic? It will be recalled that the 9-year basic education is to achieve unhindered access to education which should be devoid of gender related prejudices.
7. What should constitute the parameters for the new Basic Education Certificate award after the 9-year Basic Education?
8. How do we ensure uniform assessment standards across states, as under the reform arrangement, these states are expected to place pupils in the Upper Basic level as well as administer the Basic Certificate Examinations at the end of the 9-year schooling?

It is desirable that these and other related issues should guide the setting of assessment standards in the education reform context. Thus educational assessment within the context of these reforms should consider the following:

1. Assessment of productive work skills should depart from paper and pencil test to the more broadened culture of using indicators drawn from industry work experience.
2. While creative arts may be conventionally assessed, it may not be desirable to subject such areas as positive Cultural Values, peace and environment as well as FLHE to classical examination and using same for certification. To do this will be to defeat the aim of Values Education. We may therefore use the demonstration of pupils' change in behaviour in these areas as necessary requirements for mobility across the levels of the 9-year basic education programme.
3. Pupils who by systematic observation in values education and related areas have failed to demonstrate desirable change in behaviour do not progress to higher classes no matter their level of cognitive performance.

4. Attempts should be made in current reform measures to reconcile the values cultivated by schooling with cultural demands through the integration of national core values and traditional technology and craft into the basic education curriculum.
5. Assessment standards under the current reforms, must define competencies, skills and knowledge for both classroom based learning with a view to providing employers accurate information concerning the abilities of learners.
6. Educators and policy makers are calling for a closer match between the skills and knowledge students learn in school and those they will need to live successfully in their communities after leaving school (Winking and Bond, 1995). Assessment standards should therefore increase emphasis on the measurement of opportunities to learn.

WHAT NATIONAL FRAMEWORK IS NEEDED FOR ESTABLISHING ASSESSMENT STANDARDS IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM CHANGE?.

National standards often describe expectations of skills, knowledge competencies and behaviour needed by learners to perform at high levels. They reflect the criteria for judging quality: the quality of what students know and are able to do; the quality of the programs that provide the opportunity for students to learn; the quality of teaching; the quality of the system that supports teachers and programs; and the quality of assessment practices and policies. National standards provide criteria to judge progress toward a national vision of learning and teaching in a system that promotes excellence, providing a banner around which reformers can rally. By building on the best of current practice, assessment *Standards* would help to chart the course into the future and take our educational system beyond the constraints of present structures of schooling toward a shared vision of excellence.

A carefully conceptualized National Assessment Framework (NAF) should contain:

- Explicit statements about the purposes that the assessment will serve;

- Descriptions of the substance and technical quality of the skills, knowledge, etc. being assessed for classroom based learning as well as for non-formal and informal open apprenticeship learning;
- Clear descriptions of relationships between assessment information and decisions that could be taken.
- Descriptions of the data-collection method, including varieties of instruments and sources of data that should be used.
- Internal consistency measures and procedures.
- Descriptions of the method for data interpretation.
- Descriptions of the decisions that could be made, including who will make the decisions and by what procedures.

The abolition of selective entrance examination into the JSS entails that the school based examination at the lower and middle basic school be strengthened for quality assurance. In order to achieve this, each state should set up state based examination entities as agencies of the state ministries of education where they do not exist. These state based examination agencies should monitor and facilitate the strengthening of school based assessment in the context of curriculum reform as well as organize the newly established Basic Education Certificate Examination at the end of the 9-year basic education.

Presently at the National level in Nigeria the National Examinations Council (NECO) conducts the Junior Secondary Examination Certificate for Federal Junior Secondary schools while the states essentially do the same for state schools. In this process NECO provides a measure of quality assurance for the state based examinations. With the gradual phasing out of Federal JSS a National Examination Regulatory Agency should be established at the national level to carry out the process of quality assurance for state based examinations. In this way a strong link between school based examinations, state based examinations and national assessment standards should have been established.

CONCLUSION

The reforming of education for human development and social responsibility in Nigeria is not just providing access to a large number of Nigerians but also about developing critical competencies and knowledge for sustainable growth.. This has thrown new challenges for setting assessment standards that will strategically map out criteria for determining quality of what students knowledge and skills as well as targets for determining competencies; the quality of programs that provide the opportunity for students to learn (school based, open apprenticeship); the basis for the comparison of schools and programmes; and criteria to judge progress toward a national vision of learning and teaching in a system that promotes excellence. Such plan would also serve as a framework for teachers, examining bodies, employers of labour to buy into as well as in giving direction to the planning and implementation of educational programmes. Judging by the amount of energy and funds expended on educational reforms under the present administration, the development of an educational assessment framework is a national emergency.

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