KEDI-UNESCO Bangkok Joint Seminar 2010

Monitoring Student Learning Outcomes and School Performance: Towards improving quality of learning and reducing disparities
(Seoul, Republic of Korea, 12-15 July 2010)

Concept Paper

1. Context

There has been an increasing concern over quality issues in education at both national and international levels. While more and more children are enrolled in school and are staying longer in the education system, there is a growing need to understand whether students are acquiring the necessary knowledge, attitude and skills in school and thus an increased emphasis is placed on assessment of learning outcomes. Likewise, while there is still a concern over the uneven distribution of education opportunities, there exist also significant inequalities in learning achievement, which deserve much attention.

Until recently, monitoring of education quality largely focused on input measures, such as infrastructure and learning materials, teacher supply and qualifications. The focus continues to be on inputs, or at most on outputs. Available and reliable data are limited for monitoring learning outcomes to better understand other quality aspects of national education systems, as well as the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. There is an urgent need to look beyond inputs/outputs and to move towards focus on learning outcomes.

It is often pointed out that EFA Goal 6 on quality ("improving all aspects of quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills") is one of the difficult goals to monitor and achieve. Moreover, "information about the uneven dispersion of learning across regions, households, ethnic groups, and most importantly, schools and classrooms often goes under-reported" (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009). Information and data collected are not always effectively utilized to analyze the situation and to translate into policy change and into teaching and learning. Better understanding and better analysis of learning outcomes can greatly contribute to monitoring and achievement of EFA Goal 6.

Assessments of learning outcomes take different forms. International learning achievement surveys, such as OECD’s PISA and IEA’s TIMSS, have been important sources of measurement and analysis of student learning achievement, especially as they allow cross-country comparison based on international benchmarks and help evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of education systems. An increasing number of developing countries, including those from Asia, are taking part in these assessments.
There are also national learning assessments that are conducted with increasing frequency in various countries, including in Asia and the Pacific. According to *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008*, the percentage of countries that carried out any national assessment increased from 11% to 64% in East Asia and the Pacific and from 11% to 44% in South and West Asia. Although these national learning assessments are not designed to allow international comparison, they provide rich information about learning outcomes according to nationally defined standards.

Another type of country level assessment commonly practiced is nation-wide public examinations; they are often conducted at major system transition points, such as from lower to upper secondary or from secondary to higher education or to the labour market. Such examinations have traditionally played, and are still playing, an important role in this region and can provide useful information on learning achievement. UNESCO Bangkok has recently conducted a quick mapping and study of existing national examinations (focusing on secondary education) in the region.

Lastly, school-based assessments are attracting much attention and there is a move towards improving the methodologies, standards, norms and operational rigour so that such school-based assessments can constitute another viable channel to regularly monitor learning outcomes and improve quality.

Since 1997, KEDI and UNESCO Bangkok have been organizing joint regional seminars to bring together experts and government officials from developing countries in the region to exchange knowledge and experiences on various themes related to education planning and management. Since 2002, the seminar has focused on EFA related themes.

The year’s seminar will focus on monitoring of student learning outcomes and school performance. It will not only focus on the level of academic knowledge but will also cover broader skills and competences that students gain from schooling to prepare them for life.

The seminar will highlight in particular learning assessments and examinations conducted at national and school levels, as opposed to international comparative learning achievement surveys, which are very much documented and discussed in various international meetings. However, specific country experiences in conducting such international learning achievement surveys will also be discussed as part of the seminar’s main objective to review and advise on various approaches to the assessment of learning outcomes in schools.

2. Objectives of the Seminar

- Clarify and understand the different concepts and approaches used to assess student learning outcomes in both primary and secondary education globally and in particular in the participating countries of Asia.
• Review national policy priorities regarding quality of education and existing systems to monitor student performance and attitudes, such as informed citizenship and teamwork.
• Share research findings based on the data analysis of selected international and national student assessments on what they reveal about student knowledge and skills levels, and disparities.
• Exchange experiences on how assessment of learning outcomes has affected the school and classroom effectiveness and possible ways to improve the existing systems and/or introduce new systems in different country contexts.
• Identify gaps in the existing knowledge-base on assessment of learning outcomes and make recommendations for further research.

3. Participants

• Experts and researchers from KEDI and relevant Korean policy research institutions
• Resource persons and facilitators from UNESCO Bangkok (EPR and AIMS) and UIS Montreal
• Experts from selected countries in Asia (Cambodia, China, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines and Singapore): senior ministry officials with extensive experience in education sector policies and national learning assessments, experts from relevant research institutions
• International experts

4. Organization of the Seminar

The seminar will open with two keynote speeches and an introduction session on national policy approaches to monitoring learning outcomes. Following the presentations, all participants will be mobilized in a mapping exercise to identify existing national and international assessments and/or examinations in each participating country.

The seminar will be composed of seven thematic sessions. Each session will have a facilitator to introduce the topic and to moderate the discussion. Presenters will have the opportunity to speak for approximately 20 minutes. Clarifying questions can be asked immediately following the presentation while half an hour is reserved at the end of each session for broader discussions on the topic. All participants are encouraged to engage in discussions. At the end of Day 3 in the concluding session, overall lessons learnt and policy implications will be addressed, knowledge gaps and further research needs will be identified, and proposed next actions (possible regional cooperation) will be discussed.
There will be a study tour on the last day of the seminar to a specialized science high school and a general high school. In preparation for the visit, a briefing session will be held at the end of Day 2. During the tour, participants will have the opportunity to meet and have discussions with the principal, school administrators, teachers and students. Time will be allocated following the tour to discuss findings and share experiences. The seminar agenda provides further details on the schedule.

5. **Proposed discussion points for each session**

**Section 1: Reviewing national learning assessments (1) – Examining national strategies in conducting national assessments**

- What motivates countries to conduct assessments? What are the sources of concern, such as teacher quality, school environments, socio-economic factors, that lead to assessments being conducted at the national level?
- What different institutional arrangements and assessment approaches exist to undertake national learning assessments?
- What is assessed (curriculum based and subject-oriented or cross-cutting skills and competencies)?

**Section 2: Reviewing national learning assessments (2) - Sharing of research findings analyzing different factors affecting achievement scores**

- What do the results of assessments reveal (e.g. student knowledge and skills levels, disparities, trends over time)?
- What additional statistical data are collected and analyzed to better understand assessment results?
- What aspects of the findings have drawn policy attention?
- How have the results of the assessment been utilized to improve school and classroom practices?
- What challenges do countries face in conducting national learning assessments?

**Section 3: Drawing useful lessons from participation in international assessment studies**

- What do the results of country specific data from international assessment studies tell about the situation in a given country?
- Are the results of international assessment studies consistent with national assessments?
• What are the advantages and limitations of using results of country specific data from international assessment studies to understand knowledge levels and identify gaps within a given country?

**Session 4: Making effective use of school-based assessments**

• What role can school-based assessments play in improving the reliability and validity of assessments?
• What strategies are employed by countries to effectively use the results of school-based assessments to improve school and classroom practices?
• How are these practices linked to or how have they impacted on the major education reforms (and vice-versa)?

**Session 5: Revisiting national examination systems**

• What different institutional arrangements and different approaches exist to undertake national examination assessments?
• What are the purposes of examinations? How do they contribute to raising educational standards? What are the constraints and negative consequences of examinations?
• What reform efforts are being made and what are the emerging new trends (e.g. increased weight on school-based assessment)?
• Is the data from examinations fully utilized to improve the systems? What is the potential use of examination results? What are the challenges?

**Session 6: Assessing learning outcomes beyond academic achievement**

• Can learning outcomes such as social attitudes, moral values and behaviors be measured? If so, how can they be measured effectively?
• What other new skills (e.g. computer literacy) have received policy attention in recent years and are currently being measured in schools?
• What are the new tools (e.g. ICCS Asian Module) to measure the above mentioned learning outcomes and how can they be implemented in different country contexts?
• What are the major research findings on the above mentioned learning outcomes?

**Session 7: Monitoring learning outcomes at global/regional levels for EFA: Introducing UIS’ new Assessment of Learning Outcomes (ALO) Clearing House**