



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Bangkok Office  
Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau  
for Education

## ***The Culture of Testing: Socio-cultural drivers and the effects on youth in the Asia-Pacific region***

### **Background**

In the Asia-Pacific region, a growing “culture of testing” has seen many countries striving to increase levels of student learning achievement as a core focus of their education policies and as a perceived measure of their education system’s performance. A variety of assessments and exams exist throughout the region, both low-stakes and high-stakes, that education systems aim to utilize in order to measure learning outcomes. Low-stakes exams include for example, national, regional and international assessments that measure overall achievement, but bear little or no consequences on a student’s ability or opportunity to progress through the education system. On the other hand, high-stakes exams place great consequences on learners: transition, graduation, entrance to higher education, entrance to better schools, and entrance to better jobs. These exams not only offer high-stakes to students, but can extend to teachers, schools, and families, as the test results can impact funding and recognition. While the existence of these exams may be rationalized as efforts to enhance educational quality, this focus purely on “high scores” may also be undermining other fundamental aspects of learning that are often not captured in tests and examinations, at least in the way that they are traditionally conceived.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) propose the most universal and holistic agenda for global development to date. More specifically within the context of SDG4, the goal dedicated to education, a significant shift can be observed from not only access to education but to the provision of relevant and effective learning, emphasizing life-long and life-wide learning in particular. The seventh target (Target 4.7) of the goal highlights the need for learners to acquire the knowledge and skills to contribute to sustainable development. This requires education systems to increase their focus on so called “non-academic” domains of learning, so as to ensure that learners are equipped with a broader range of skills and competencies, such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and teamwork among many others. In focusing on these aspects, it is hoped that education systems can better prepare learners for life and work and to be able to contribute to society as active citizens<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, today’s globalized economy is increasingly requiring education systems to focus more on these skills and competencies, which may not necessarily be compatible with traditional styles of teaching and learning in certain parts of the region<sup>2</sup>. As recognized in UNESCO’s report *Rethinking Education*, this need for education systems to change “...means moving beyond literacy and numeracy to focus on learning

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Bangkok. 2016. Happy Schools: A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia Pacific. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002441/244140E.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Mason, Mark. 2014. Culture and educational outcomes in “Confucian heritage” societies in Asia. *Revue internationale d’éducation de Sèvres*. Colloque: L’éducation en Asie en 2014 : Quels enjeux mondiaux ? <https://ries.revues.org/3812>

environments and on new approaches to learning for greater justice, social equity and global solidarity”<sup>3</sup>.

While some countries are increasingly reorienting their education policies to include the teaching and assessment of these skills and competencies, a number of factors have made this challenging, including how to define, operationalize and assess these skills<sup>4</sup>. As a result, many teachers and educators continue to focus on the more “academic” domains of learning that are far more likely to be tested as part of public examinations and national assessments and that are easier to quantify as a “test score”. In addition, international assessment programmes have also influenced education policy reforms. According to Robinson and Lou (2015), while international league tables may not themselves be the problem, they do influence policymakers, driving them to place excessive emphasis on the results of such assessments and to impose standards on school systems in order to compare and benchmark their performance with their counterparts in other countries.<sup>5</sup> This has led to growing debate in international discourse as to what exactly is being measured as part of assessment efforts, and whether assessment programmes are focusing on those skills and competencies that will enable learners to contribute to more peaceful and happier societies. As argued by Layard and Hagell (2015), “if you treasure it, measure it. If schools do not measure the well-being of their children but do measure their intellectual development, the latter will always take precedence”<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, in the Asia-Pacific region as well as other parts of the world, this measurement tends to focus on the cognitive areas at the expense of other aspects of learner development.

Indeed, this predominant focus on academic achievement (particularly in subjects such as reading and mathematics) and results of student assessments/examinations have been seen as undermining student happiness and well-being in the Asia-Pacific region. According to UNESCO Bangkok’s 2016 report on *Happy Schools*, respondents to a regional survey ranked “high student workload and stress driven by exams and grades” as the second most important factor resulting in “unhappy schools”<sup>7</sup>. The report also indicates that this pressure on students to perform in tests and exams may also be related to disengagement from education, increased stress among students, growing cases of bullying and school violence, and in the worst cases, higher suicide rates among youth in some countries.

Within the context of the Asia-Pacific, the most diverse region in the world, a myriad of important socio-cultural factors may be driving this growing “culture of testing”. While the origins of standardized testing systems can be traced back to Confucius with the introduction of testing to select civil servants on the basis of meritocracy, a growing body of research is examining the drivers behind this phenomenon, especially in Confucian Heritage Cultures<sup>8</sup>. Among numerous Confucian values such as cultivation of the self, a strong work ethic, and a high regard for education as a promise for upward social mobility, Mason (2014) argues that Confucian Heritage Cultures tend to hold “...a belief,

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<sup>3</sup> UNESCO. 2015. *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?* <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002325/232555e.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO Bangkok. 2015. *Transversal Competencies in Education Policy and Practice.* <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002319/231907E.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Robin and Lou. 2015. *Creative Schools. Revolutionizing Education from the Ground Up.*

<sup>6</sup> Layard and Hagell. 2015. *Healthy Young Mind: Transforming the Mental Health of Children.* In Helliwell, Layard and Sachs (eds.) *World Happiness Report 2015.* [http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/04/WHR15\\_Sep15.pdf](http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/04/WHR15_Sep15.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO Bangkok. 2016. *Happy Schools: A Framework for Learner Well-being in the Asia Pacific.* <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002441/244140E.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, K. 2012. *Culture and Learning: Reconstructing Research on Learning for Students in the Asia-Pacific.* Paper prepared for UNESCO Bangkok.

*generally more widespread than might be the case in other societies, that success depends more on effort than on innate capacity, and hence that everyone can succeed, provided that he or she works hard enough; a commitment to repetitive drilling and to apparently rote learning in an acceptance of the effort needed to succeed... ”<sup>9</sup>.*

In other societies in the region, this emphasis on testing may be fuelled by countries’ efforts to reform their education systems to reach so-called “international standards”, and thereby increase their performance in international league tables, or by perceptions of high performance in such assessments as a proxy for competitiveness in the global economy. In some sub-regions such as Central Asia for instance, this has been considered the case as education systems transitioned to align themselves with a globalized market economy in the late 1990s<sup>10</sup>, resulting in relatively young “global” education systems. At the same time, increased mobility in the region has also meant that there is a growing market for students looking to study in universities either in major cities or abroad, which has also increased competition among students. However, as most university-entrance requirements continue to focus on examination results, little is known of what other “non-academic” factors are taken into consideration when selecting students for admission.

Parental expectations play a tremendous role in increasing pressure on students to perform academically, and should not be underestimated in terms of how these may be fuelling such a “culture of testing” through the rapid expansion of shadow education, with providers of private tuition across the region preparing students in the lead up to university-entrance and other exams, as well as generally serving to supplement formal schooling. Some argue that one of the major drivers behind this pressure, in addition to other traditional values, is the chance of social mobility, where parents wish for their children to have a future beyond “the factory or the farm”<sup>11</sup>. In addition, “tiger parenting” has also formed an important part of the debate in the region with regard to parental pressures on their children’s academic achievement, with some arguing that closely supervising their children’s homework, reducing extracurricular and other social activities, and using punishment and shaming as negative motivation are key to ensuring that they excel academically<sup>12</sup>. With parents and the family often considered as more influential on students’ choices and perspectives than teachers, their role within the context of the “culture of testing” deserves further exploration.

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<sup>9</sup> Mason, Mark. 2014. Culture and educational outcomes in “Confucian heritage” societies in Asia. *Revue internationale d’éducation de Sèvres*. Colloque: L’éducation en Asie en 2014 : Quels enjeux mondiaux ?

<https://ries.revues.org/3812>

<sup>10</sup> World Bank. 2000. Hidden Challenges to Education Systems in Transition Economies. [http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/eca/eca.nsf/Attachments/Hidden+Challenges+to+Education/\\$File/ECA.layout.pdf](http://lnweb90.worldbank.org/eca/eca.nsf/Attachments/Hidden+Challenges+to+Education/$File/ECA.layout.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Larmer, B. 2014. Inside a Chinese Test-Prep Factory. Published on 31 December 2104 in The New York Times Magazine. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/magazine/inside-a-chinese-test-prep-factory.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/magazine/inside-a-chinese-test-prep-factory.html?_r=1)

<sup>12</sup> Chua, Amy. . January 8 2011. Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior. The Wall Street Journal. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754>

## Objectives

This study proposes to better understand the socio-cultural drivers behind the “culture of testing” and their effects on the relevance of education to youth cultures and aspirations. This focus on “testing” more specifically refers to the reliance and focus on examinations utilized for transition and selection purposes, so called “high-stakes exams”; however, the impact of low-stakes assessments and exams will also be explored. The study will examine the different aspects and perceptions that shape education policies and systems as a result of the culture of testing, examining implications for policy making, particularly in light of the SDG 4 targets.

The **socio-cultural context** will first be examined, both at the regional and national levels in the selected countries of focus. This will also include an analysis of cultural practices, philosophical and theoretical debates on the quality of learning with regard to testing and broader assessment practices. It will then explore **societal pressures on testing** and on students to perform highly in the selected countries of focus. Based on primary data collection, it will seek to better understand the perspectives of parents with regard to their children’s grades and scores, as well as exploring the effects of testing on teaching and learning from the perspective of students, teachers and providers of private tuition. It will also consider the perspectives of other actors such as employers with regard to the impact and relevance of testing in equipping learners with the most in-demand skills and competencies for the world of work.

Building upon UNESCO’s ongoing research on assessment of transversal competencies, this study will then examine responses from a policy perspective through analysis of **education policies and practices with regard to testing** in the selected countries. This analysis will consider phenomena such as how testing may contribute to the shaping/narrowing of the curriculum, as well as the extent to which weight is given to assessment of more “non-academic” domains of learning. It will also include a brief examination of how countries across the various sub-regions of the Asia-Pacific are all placing significant importance on international league tables– regardless of whether they rank among the highest or lowest.

It will then consider **the relevance of assessments**, to examine how far they are measuring knowledge, skills and competencies that are useful for students’ future life and work as expressed by youth themselves. This will involve detailed analysis of assessment frameworks, university admissions requirements and the focus areas of private tutoring in the selected countries, contrasting these with the aspirations of youth as expressed in surveys and other formats.

Based on these various factors, and to the extent possible, the study will offer **policy recommendations** with a view to enhancing education policies and programmes in regard to testing (including potentially considering alternative assessments) as well as more broadly equipping education systems to provide a comprehensive and holistic education to youth in spite of (or in light of) the “culture of testing”.

## Methodology

1. Literature review and secondary data analysis
  - a. **Regional Desk Study** to explore theoretical concepts with regard to testing, the relevance and effectiveness of learning in regards to youth aspirations, and broader socio-cultural factors, as well as to highlight major initiatives that are taking place in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.
  - b. **National Desk Studies** will be conducted in the selected countries of focus in order to explore socio-cultural factors within the country context, to document education policies and practices with regard to testing, the role of private tuition, as well as an analytical review of the content of major national examinations and university admissions criteria, contrasting these with youth aspirations
2. **Primary data collection and analysis in selected countries**
  - a. **Surveys, interviews and FGDs** to explore the societal pressures of testing through the perspective of parents, students and teachers, as well as other actors such as providers of private tutoring.

## Expected Outputs/Outcomes

1. Comprehensive overview of the socio-cultural drivers of the “culture of testing” in the Asia-Pacific region, based on regional and national desk studies, which will highlight the perspectives of learners (youth), parents, teachers, providers of private tuition and employers, with regard to the relevance of both educational provision and student learning achievement in the selected countries of focus.
2. An analysis of major educational policies on testing, the content of national assessments and examinations at the upper secondary level, and university admissions requirements in selected countries.
3. A set of recommendations for further study and for policymakers, education providers as well as for school-level community members.

## Geographical Scope

This study will focus on six to ten countries in order to reflect various sub-regions of the Asia-Pacific region, as well as different socio-economic contexts, cultural factors and contrasting levels of education system development.

## Timeframe

Date	Task	Observations
<b>Ongoing</b>	Desk Study	Major global and regional research, initiatives and programmes.
<b>November 2016</b>	Orientation Meeting	Finalize Research Framework and methodology
<b>November 2016-February 2017</b>	Country research	Six country studies
<b>February-April 2017</b>	Report writing	Regional synthesis report
<b>April 2017</b>	Peer review	Internal and external review
<b>May 2017</b>	Finalization	Editing, proofreading & design
<b>June 2017</b>	Publication	Design, Printing and Publishing

## Participation

UNESCO Bangkok is seeking research institutes/researchers from across Asia and the Pacific to carry out case studies in their respective country. Participating researchers should have:

- extensive knowledge of their country's education system, curriculum, education system goals and objectives, and both public examinations and assessments
- knowledge of sociological and cultural issues that impact the country's education system
- experience in quantitative and qualitative research: developing, conducting, and analysing surveys, conducting interviews and focus group discussions; field studies, etc.

The study will comprise 2-3 months of research and report writing following an orientation meeting in Bangkok, Thailand to finalize the research framework, methodology and tools. The research expected to be undertaken includes: desk study and literature review; primary data collection; and drafting of case study.

To express interest in conducting this research and joining the Orientation Meeting in late November, please contact: Mark Manns ([m.manns@unesco.org](mailto:m.manns@unesco.org)) or Ramya Vivekanandan ([r.vivekanandan@unesco.org](mailto:r.vivekanandan@unesco.org)) at UNESCO Bangkok.