

Introducing Assessment Practice

Bhaageerutty Vinod Sharma

Research Development Officer-ICT

Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, Mauritius

E-mail: vsbhaageerutty@mesonline.mu

Abstract

One of the essential beliefs of the education reform is that all students should be literate. Previous studies have shown that every child has a unique competencies and skills. There has been a change in the curriculum and its mode of delivery which will allow the students to have different choices in terms of regional and academics. Different strategies have been established to promote equity and adaptability. This philosophy is to promote four years for the extended which is in line with the nine years education program of the educational reform. This helps to promote equity among the students by improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Keywords: Extended Program, National Qualification Framework, Primary School Achievement Certificate, National Certificate of Education, School- Based Assessment, Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, Quality Assurance Division

1.Introduction and Context of the NCE

The Pre-vocational education has changed its appellation to Extended Program (EP) through the educational reform where students who have not been able to go through the National Qualification Framework (NQF) Level 1 which was previously known as the Primary School Achievement Certificate (PSAC). In a bid to give sound learning opportunities to learners needing more time to attain the required level of competencies, an Extended Programme has been designed for them as from Grade 7. The aim of the reform and the NQF is to provide equity to all students by following the same educational curriculum till grade 9. At the end of the lower secondary education, the students have to sit the National Certificate of Education (NCE) so as to secure a Level 2 of the National Qualifications Framework which will help them to decide about the educational pathway.

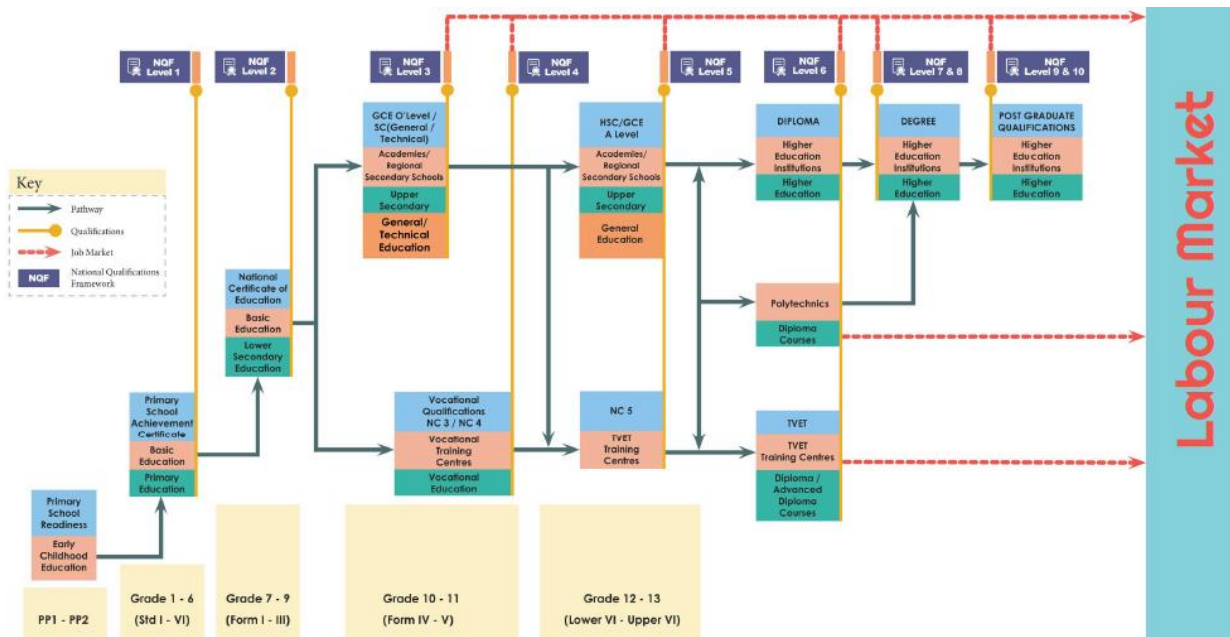


Figure 1. The new educational pathway and the NQF
Source: Adapted from “EXPLAINING THE NYCBE REFORM”
<http://ministry-education.govmu.org/>

After completing their Basic Education Cycle in four years as compared to the mainstream students who take three years. Introduced in 2018, although the EP has undergone lots of critiques as these students are weak academically but they have to pursue the same curriculum and syllabus, which is unfair to them. But on the other side this is promoting equity among students. Its implementation was generally motivated by stakeholders in education, but according the A102 course materials, is whether a qualification is used in the way it was intended (fitness for purpose).

Doing away with some of the pressure resulting from the current regime of high-stake assessment and examination underscores the necessity to introduce alternate forms of assessment, one of which is the School- Based Assessment (SBA). According to Vitello & Williamson (2018), it is identified as a pleasant qualification that improves student educator relationships. Thus, this can be used to allow EP students to either proceed to vocation education or academic qualification. This is in line with the information provided in the A102 course materials, which states that course work-based qualifications are valuable because they are more student-centred, interesting and engaging, and are perhaps an additional thought of a student's ability than an examination result.

2. Challenges During Development of EP

During the A102 course and according to Hoadley (2012), it was observed that the key issue encounter during the development of a qualification is to handle the different expectations of all stakeholders. The extended program is extremely sustained among the different stakeholders but educators' voices have been raised against the fact that the extended programme pupils will follow the same syllabus as their mainstream counterparts. In addition, they were not trained to work with those students and were more concern about how the assessment and marking exercise will be carried out for grade 9.

According to the A102 course materials, the director of the MES and the Minister of education, marking and grading are the key concern during the development of a qualification. Theoretically speaking this would have posed a challenge for the EP during its development given that the students have to take the same assessment as the mainstreams. Having SBA, allows for assessment in some desirable learning areas that are not amenable to traditional forms of assessments where ten core subjects and three non-core subjects like Performing Arts, Physical Education and Life Skills and Values are to be assessed.

According to Newsfeed (2015), the aim of NQF level 2 is to equip all students with knowledge, foundational skills and attitudes that will guarantee success to all in their future learning. During development, decisions were made about the validity and reliability of the assessments. Also, how to fairly and accurately the assessment would be carried out. According to Kyahurwa, O. (2013), a new approach to assessment for its effective use across the grades, with continuous and formative assessment complementing class tests, end-of-year assessment and other forms of summative assessment. For the SBA, moderation was an important concern in ensuring that all schools and educators mark and set the task in the same way. Thus, the MES has provided a moderation guideline on the SBA. Another major common issue with SBA is its vulnerability of malpractice and cheating. The Ministry of Education with the help of the MES had convince the stakeholders namely, Educators, Parents and Schools that such a qualification would be accurately and fairly marked and graded.

The major concern was to balance the need to evaluate skills development fairly and accurately without creating an unpleasant atmosphere for students and educators. This anticipates the creation of the whole child development a reality with a responsible citizen and a productive contributor to society.

3. Development of Assessment Materials

According to Baume (2002), the creation of assessment materials is the key challenge for educators and students. The materials need to be relevant and appropriate for indicating the competencies the qualification aims to reveal.

The assessment is based on the following principles:

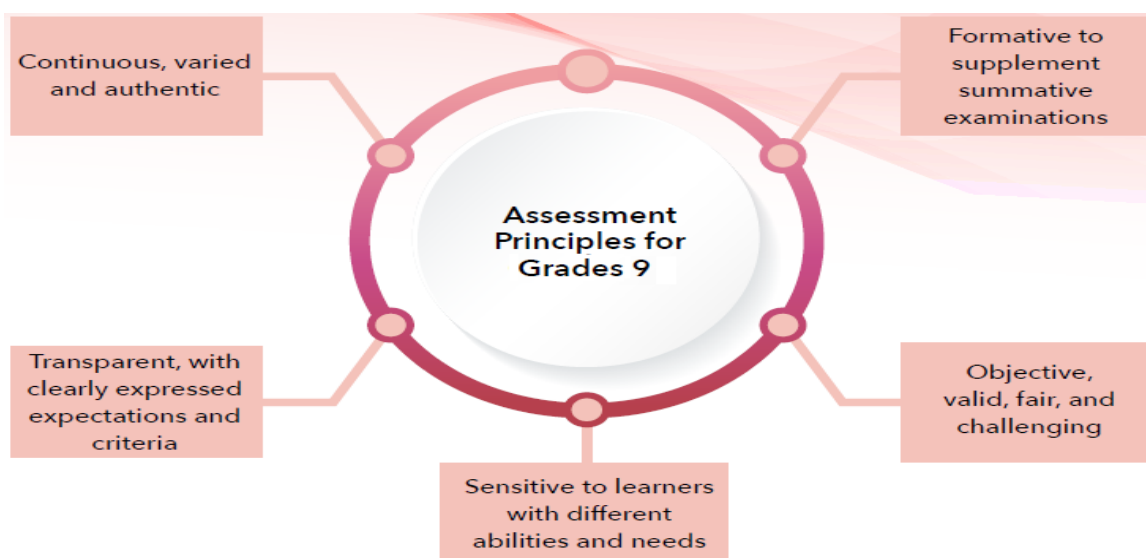


Figure 2. Assessment Principles for Grades 9
Source: Adapted from Teaching and Learning Syllabus form NCF

So, the students are required to have a written assessment in the core subjects and to produce an artefact and a report for the SBA. Along with this, different supporting documents is required, some of which are completed by the educators. These seem appropriate for assessing the target skills with the use of a 3-point rating scale to describe performance in noncore subjects at Grades as Proficient, Intermediate and Basic. The use of a datasheet needs to be filled in by the educators to explain their rationale for marks awarded. The moderation guideline and the datasheet like a descriptive levels-based mark scheme for the SBA, where there are descriptors of what level of achievement is required to earn different grade.

The assessment materials aim at having positive effects on teaching and learning with positive washback into the curriculum and into the educational system. An important consideration during the development of the assessment was the potential impact that it would have on the life chances of candidates, allowing for maximum inclusion and retention of students in the system while maintaining standards. So, there is a lot to consider when writing a question to ensure it is as clear as possible and as the extended streams students are of low ability, some pictures need to be used as illustration to explain concepts. The information must be in such a format that it is not overlooked by the students who often go straight to the question and don't read the stem and contextual information. It should be as concise and clear as possible and possibly broken up so only the parts relevant to each question part are present. The pagination is also important, the students don't want to find a table of results on one page and have to turn the page to plot a graph for example. It creates a lot of paper rustling in the exam room. The balance of question types and lengths is important, as is the balance of demand and assessment objectives. These balancing acts appear to function to ensure the right level of challenge for students taking the qualification. If there is too much educator involvement, this will stifle skills development and not offer an appropriate challenge, which according to the A102 course materials is an important aspect when developing assessments.

The written assessment was set by a panel of experts including the setter, moderators and vetters. Thus, according to the A102 course materials, assessments are often created by a subject specialist to ensure standards are maintained. Since the NCE is first examinable in 2020, the qualification was piloted in some mix abilities and high flyers students of different educational zones.

4.Setting and Maintaining Standards

All written and SBA are set and taken under the supervision of the MES. The results of these written examinations are weighted nationally, so that it makes no difference where a student takes his/her examination. This also guarantees the equivalence of every outcomes attained through this system. The MES moderate the marking for all SBA. The SBA are initially marked in the candidates' schools and then are sent to the MES. The main reason for this moderation is to ensure the fairness of the SBA.

Setting standards for the NCE qualification is a complex technical challenge. It serves for many purposes such as certification, promotion to grade 10, orientation and admission to academies. This means it needs to be both an accurate record of the skills of a student and a precise measure of the student's ability against other students.

As the NCE qualification is a high-stake examination, the MES ensure that standard is maintained through

- The difficulty and/or the amount of knowledge and skills that students must learn during their course of study - the content standard
- The level of attainment and performance that the student must demonstrate in the examination to be awarded a particular qualification or grade – the assessment and performance standards.

Given the high stakes nature of this examination, it is surprising that the ways SBA standards are conceptualized and operationalized. The MES closely monitor standard-setting in SBA because by doing this it expects very close comparability of grade standards. Moderators are sent to schools to ensure that the assessment standards are maintained and no malpractice is being favored. The write-ups, datasheet, student diaries and so on could be distributed fairly easily to moderators electronically, but it would be more of a challenge to distribute possible outcomes such as art works, dance performances, physical exercise or sports events. Video recordings could be generated however, this creates additional logistical challenges due to large file sizes and one could argue that a video recording or an image of an art work is different to the live product and this could affect moderation decisions. For the written assessment the Quality Assurance Division (QAD) of the Ministry compares each school's results from internally-assessed and externally assessed standards in each subject. Internal and external achievement rates differ nationally and it is expected that each school will broadly reflect national patterns. If a school's internal results are greatly different from what is expected on the basis of their external results (and if the educator-moderator agreement rates are poor) QAD works with the school to improve its internal assessment processes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the NCE and the EP is an exciting and important qualification which plays an important role in developing skills to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The unique nature of each type of assessment and the focus on evaluating the competencies had created many challenges during development and the creation of assessment materials. There has been a number of variables that has affected the setting and maintaining of standards. However, the confidence that stakeholders show for the NCE and its NQF Level 2, for example, orientation, certification, admission to academies and promotion to grade 10 suggests that these challenges are being successfully addressed.

References

- Baume, M., & Yorke, M. (2002). Reliability of Assessment by Portfolio on a Course to Develop and Accredite Educators in Higher Education, *Studies in Higher Education* 27, pp7-25.
- Hoadley, U. (2012). *curriculum: Organizing knowledge for the classroom*. Cape Town: Oxford University.
- Kyahirwa, O. (2013). The challenges faced by Primary School Principals in Curriculum Management: A case study of Region C in Gauteng Province. MA-dissertation. University of South Africa.
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources. (2014). *Education Reforms in Action 2008-2014*
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Human Resources. (2009). *Mauritius: Education and Human Resources Strategy Plan: 2020*
- Newsfeed, Education Reform. (2015). National Curriculum Framework 2015 launched, December 16, 2015.
- Newton, O. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/grading-vocational-and-technical-qualifications> Rughooputh, S. *Small Island Challenges in Educational Reforms: The Case of Mauritius*, 2011.
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/181282-how-previously-achieved-btec-units-can-contribute-to-cambridge-technicals.pdf>
- Vitello, S. & Williamson, J. (2018). *AS level trends 2017*. Cambridge Assessment Research Report. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)