Commonwealth Quality Standards for Education

Education Quality Standards Background Paper
Commonwealth Secretariat, Marlborough House
Tuesday, 7 June 2016

Purpose/Key points

- Quality is an important aspect for educational outcomes
- Currently there seems to be no clear global or Commonwealth consensus on what is meant by quality
- The Education Ministers’ Action Group (EMAG) asked for the development of Commonwealth Standards for Quality in Education. This will be presented at the 20 CCEM.
- The roundtable is the first in a series of meetings to develop ‘Commonwealth Educational Quality Standards’

Context

In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All noted that, ‘the generally poor quality of education needed to be improved and recommended that education be made both universally available and more relevant’ (UNESCO, 2005). The Declaration also identified quality as a requirement for achieving the fundamental goal of equity. While the concept of quality was not fully developed, it was recognized that expanding access alone would be insufficient for education to contribute fully to the development of the individual and society. Emphasis was hence placed on assuring a rise in children’s cognitive development by improving the quality of their education. A decade later, the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) declared that access to quality education was the right of every child. It stated that quality was ‘at the heart of education’ – a fundamental determinant of enrolment, retention and achievement. Its expanded definition of quality set out the desirable characteristics of:

- Learners (healthy, motivated students)
- Processes (competent teachers)
- Content (relevant curricula)
- Systems (good governance and equitable resource allocation) (UNESCO, 2005)

Education is a complex phenomenon with many interacting dimensions of quality in varied contexts. This makes it difficult to define its quality.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report highlighted that opinions about quality in education are by no means unified and despite the growing consensus about the need to provide access to education of ‘good quality’, there is much less agreement about what the term actually means in practice. Although this established an agenda for achieving good education quality, it did not ascribe any relative weight to the various dimensions identified (UNESCO, 2005). This is what the development of the Commonwealth Quality Standards in Education aims to reflect.

David Chapman and Don Adams, in their report on ‘the quality of education in developing Asia’, discussed that the precise meaning of education quality and the path to improvement of quality are often left unexplained (Chapman, D., D. Adams, 2002).
Furthermore, interpretation of quality may be based on an institution’s or program's reputation, or a complete theory or ideology of acquisition and application of learning (Adams, 1998).

As education systems grow and the numbers of stakeholders and clients involved in education decisions change, the potential for misunderstanding, disagreement, and conflict regarding the meaning of quality increases.

Absolute consensus among parents, teachers, administrators, and students as to the ingredients of quality, how to measure it, and how to initiate and sustain improvement is unlikely. Nevertheless, many dimensions can be identified and addressed. This roundtable aims to develop a cross cutting set of Universal Education Quality Standards.

**Mandate for action**

The Education Ministers Action Group (EMAG), formed at the 19th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (19CCEM) in The Bahamas in June 2015, was commissioned with the purpose of guiding delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for education in the Commonwealth. It was also aimed at providing strategic direction and advice in following up on points agreed at the 19CCEM and presented as the Nassau Declaration. It is envisioned that this action plan will form the basis for reporting on the Nassau Declaration’s key deliverables at the next EMAG (scheduled for January 2017) and a final set of standards will be presented at the 20CCEM in 2018 in Fiji.

In the meeting, the ministers recognized that all countries must not compromise on equity and quality, learning from good practice, and the lessons of countries that have made significant progress in these areas. Therefore, in line with the core values of the Commonwealth Charter, the Commonwealth Secretariat is developing effective policy frameworks to support efforts in this area.

Ministers also celebrated successes that have been achieved to date in the drive for universal primary education, but noted that achievements in relation to access leave much work to be done in the areas of equitable provision and quality.

The role of the Commonwealth in continuing to support development of effective education initiatives as well as the need for greater coordination of quality assurance in education by Commonwealth institutions, where requested by member states, as well as the potential for shared curricula and quality frameworks where this is something member states wish to explore.

**Process**

In the run-up to the Roundtable, the Health and Education Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat held an eDiscussion on the establishment of a set of standards in education which closed on 30 May 2016. The contributions have been summarised and is intended to be included in the conceptualisation of the proposed Quality Standards in Education document.

**Why now? (Links with SDG Indicators)**

Developing quality standards in education is in line with the Commonwealth Strategic Plan to improve capacity building for social development.

At the 47th Session of the Statistical Commission convened in March 2016, the Inter-Agency Expert Group on Sustainable Development Indicators provided a proposal of a Global Indicator Framework for the SDGs. The Statistical Commission accepted these as a “practical starting point”, noting that they are subject to further technical refinement. These indicators are not necessarily applicable in all contexts, with member states having agreed to develop national and regional indicators to complement the global framework that are able to account for national priorities, capacities, etc.
These indicators are intended for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to monitor progress towards the goals and targets, based on measurable outcomes.

Below are the indicators for SDG4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SDG4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 4.1.1 Percentage of children/young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics. Disaggregation’s: sex, location, wealth (and others where data are available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.2.1 Percentage of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being. Disaggregation’s: sex, location, wealth (and others where data are available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.2.2 Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.3.1 Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the last 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.4.1 Percentage of youth/adults with information and communications technology (ICT) skills by type of skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.5.1 Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous people and conflict-affected as data become available) for all indicators on this list that can be disaggregated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.6.1 Percentage of population in a given age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional (a) literacy and (b) numeracy skills. Disaggregation’s: sex, location, wealth (and others where data are available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.7.1* Percentage of 15-year-old students enrolled in secondary school demonstrating at least a fixed level of knowledge across a selection of topics in environmental science and geoscience. The exact choice/range of topics will depend on the survey or assessment in which the indicator is collected. Disaggregation’s: sex, location, wealth (and others where data are available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.a.1 Percentage of schools with access to: (a) electricity; (b) the Internet for pedagogical purposes; (c) computers for pedagogical purposes; (d) adapted infrastructure and materials for students with disabilities; € single-sex basic sanitation facilities; and (f) basic handwashing facilities (as per the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All (WASH) indicator definitions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.b.1 Volume of official development assistance flows for scholarships by sector and type of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4.c.1 Percentage of teachers in: (a) pre-primary; (b) primary; (c) lower secondary; and (d) upper secondary education who have received at least the minimum organized teacher training (e.g. pedagogical training) per-service or in-service required for teaching at the relevant level in a given country. Disaggregation’s: sex, location, wealth (and others where data are available)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definitions of Quality/Quality in Education

As demonstrated earlier, the concept of quality has been used frequently, but has not been defined succinctly. Below are a few definitions for quality/quality in education.

- Quality refers to the degree of excellence of something; general excellence of standard or level; a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something (Oxford dictionary, 2016).
- The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously to define quality in education (Adams, 1993).
Quality is viewed as a multi-faceted concept. The quality characteristics of most importance depend on user perspectives, needs and priorities, which vary across groups of users. Given the work already done in the area of quality by several organisations, notably, Eurostat, IMF and Statistics Canada, the OECD was able to draw on their work and adapt it to the OECD. Thus quality is viewed in terms of seven dimensions, namely:

- Relevance
- Accuracy
- Credibility
- Timeliness
- Accessibility
- Interpretability
- Coherence (OECD, 2002).

Consensus existing around the basic dimensions of quality education today includes:

- Healthy well-nourished learners, who are ready to participate and learn and are supported by their families and communities,
- Safe, healthy, protective and gender-sensitive environments with adequate resources and facilities,
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills,
- Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches to facilitate learning and reduce disparities,
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society. (UNICEF, 2000)

**Example key words linked to quality in education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of Quality</th>
<th>Educational Systems and Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- student centred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- audits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Good governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretability</td>
<td>Coherence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>Acceptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Commonwealth Education Framework

The global community’s new vision for education is expressed via Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which is to, “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

The Commonwealth Education Policy Framework will encompass a life-course perspective taking a systems strengthening approach that will build capacity for education policy and frameworks across the Commonwealth in an effort to improve educational outcomes reflective of the SDGs. The framework can also be used to assist member states in finding and subsequently addressing gaps in their respective policies.

The Commonwealth Education Framework

The Commonwealth Education Framework will incorporate the following:

- Four (4) cornerstones
- Four (4) enablers
- Six (6) elements

The figure depicted below, highlights the key tenets that comprise each overarching theme, that is, cornerstones, enablers and elements. The respective components under each theme is intended to provide a high-level comprehensive overview of the main policy prescriptions required for supporting the SDGs and improving educational outcomes.
Components for sustainable education for all

Cornerstones
An analysis of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reveals that increased emphasis is being placed on the development of a quality education system that is inclusive and relevant to the needs of learners so that they are able to improve their livelihoods and contribute to sustainable development. It is in this regard that quality, equity, relevance and sustainability form the basic foundation of the Commonwealth Education Policy Framework. A framework that is built upon these four (4) fundamental cornerstones will ensure that education policies of member states give due diligence to these important anchors as a means to improving education outcomes.

Quality
- Trained teachers and well-managed classrooms,
- Learning outcomes linked to a country’s national development goals,
- Undertake audits for quality improvement,
- Physical learning environments, and
- Quality pathways and preparation for the world of work.

Equity
- Fair and inclusive education system regardless of gender, age, nationality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race and disability,
- Address the needs of different learners,
- Set and subsequently review targets for greater equity, and
- Eliminating disadvantages that restrict educational attainment.

Relevance
- Relevance of school curriculum to 21st century needs and national/regional socio-economic development needs,
- Learning experiences that are directly connected to the personal aspirations of students and real-life issues,
- Equipping students with practical skills and knowledge that can be applied in various contexts throughout their life,
- Transferable competencies, and
Flexible, innovative learning approaches and delivery methods.

**Sustainability**
- Equipping learners with new knowledge and thinking to support economic, social and environmental development, and
- Leveraging education as a means to constructively and creatively address global challenges and create more sustainable and resilient societies.

**Learning from other sectors**

**Health Quality Standards**

In healthcare systems, it can be observed that the frameworks are universal and have followed a set standard over time.

Robert J Maxwell (1992) stated that quality in health care is multidimensional. He described and explained six facets/dimensions of health care quality (**Effectiveness, Acceptability, Efficiency, Access, Equity and Relevance**) that have been very useful, both practically and conceptually, at several different levels in the system. The Institute of medicine also put forth an influential framework for the health care system which includes the following six aims:

- Safe,
- Effective,
- Patient-centered,
- Timely,
- Efficient, and
- Equitable.
This has guided major development initiatives in the public and private sectors.

### Quality Standards for Health in HEU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessible</th>
<th>Any amenity that is timely, geographically reasonable, and provided in a setting where skills and resources are appropriate to need (WHO, 2006)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Facilities which take into account the preferences and aspirations of individuals and the values and principles of their communities (WHO, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate/Relevant</td>
<td>Methods, procedures, techniques and equipment that are scientifically valid, adapted to local needs and acceptable to those who use them and to those for whom they are used, and that can be maintained and utilized with resources the community or country can afford (WHO, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>The absence of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically. (WHO, 2015) Differences in health which are unnecessary and avoidable but, in addition, are also considered unfair and unjust (Whitehead 1992). Services/facilities appropriate for the individual’s circumstance irrespective of geography, gender, race/ethnicity, age, culture, or sexual orientation (Marmot M &amp; Allen J, 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>This refers to a manner in which resource use is maximized avoiding waste (of time, money etc.) (WHO, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>This refers to services that are adherent to an evidence base and result in improved outcomes for individuals and communities, based on need (WHO, 2006) Defined as information derived from formal research and systematic investigation to identify causes and contributing factors to needs and actions in given contexts and populations (WHO, 1998) The below hierarchy of evidence based approaches is well recognised with higher levels of evidence presented further up the list: Meta analysis, Systematic review, Randomised Control Trials, Cohort studies, Case controlled studies, Case studies, Expert opinion, (Oxford Centre for Evidence-based Medicine – Levels of Evidence (March 2009) Economic appraisal is important aspect of effectiveness that considers not just whether an intervention works, i.e. its benefits, but also looks at the cost of an intervention. This is useful for priority setting allowing opportunity costs to be taken into consideration. There are a number of recognised methodologies for economic appraisal including: Cost-benefit analysis Cost-effectiveness Analysis Cost-utility analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable</td>
<td>The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) highlighted the Brundtland Commission's report (1987) which defined sustainable development as, &quot;development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs&quot;. This concept supports strong economic and social development. It also underlines the importance of protecting the natural resource base and the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Defined as packaged delivery which minimize risks and harm to service users (WHO 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible</td>
<td>Any amenity that is timely, geographically reasonable, and provided in a setting where skills and resources are appropriate to need (WHO 2006)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Malaysia education framework - Quality Education for Nation Building
(By Siti Hamisah Tapsir (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia))

Introduction
Stakeholders worldwide strive to provide quality education from primary to tertiary education levels. Arguably, quality education is not the goal itself but a pre-condition for nation building and good citizenship.

From primary to tertiary levels, education system is built on a national education framework made up of several important input and output components including access, equity, quality of teachers, and quality of curriculum, conducive learning environment, sustainability and governance.

Quality education is largely dependent on highly qualified teachers (and academics), learner centred approach and good curriculum, but admittedly, it requires more than these three elements. A holistic education eco-system with a national qualification framework that clearly outlines fundamental elements of quality assurance is the bedrock of quality education. The diagram below shows a holistic eco-system in providing quality education.

Holistic Quality Education Eco-System Diagram

Across the Commonwealth states, national education qualification frameworks vary from one state to another depending on the respective national priority. There is also a Transnational Qualifications Framework that was developed as part of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth which spans all states that wish to collaborate (http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/501).

Generally, qualification frameworks provide guidelines on the education, training and career pathways by outlining the expected learning and skill outcomes at different levels of studies. The frameworks illustrate how learners may progress from lower to higher qualifications within an education system; as well as links between levels.
In any education system, ensuring access, equity and inclusiveness is fundamental. However, in countries progressing to massification of higher education, providing heavy subsidies to tertiary level education may not be financially sustainable. Countries with limited resources may need to consider the involvement of the private sector to address the national goals of accessibility, equity and inclusiveness of education.

With the presence of private providers, a comprehensive regulatory regime is essential in order to supervise and regulate the education system. The regulatory regime or body must also address the delivery of academic programmes to ensure quality and relevance. This applies not only to private but also to public institutions. Enforcement of regulatory provisions require strong political will, as involvement of both the public and private sectors may require significant financial and physical investments by governments and investors.
References


Additional Background Papers

Cost effectiveness brief – HEU

SDG Brief

Education discussion summary paper