

# The 1<sup>st</sup> National Conference on Learning Outcomes in Uganda

## Learning Outcomes: the measure of progress for Uganda's education

### 12-13 April 2017

## Conference Communique

### Preamble

Every year, Uganda spends billions of shillings on education. Universal Primary Education, which has given so many more children access to school, accounts for over half of this. However, we know from a range of sources, such as Uwezo, Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and National Assessment of Progress in Education (NAPE), that many children are not learning, evidenced by failure to master even the most basic competencies. Simply being at school is not enough for children to develop desired learning competences when they are not supported to learn them. What we need to focus on, that really matters, is learning outcomes: what our children learn.

It is against this background that Kyambogo University, Makerere University's School of Education, Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Systems Architects (CACSA) and Uwezo at Twaweza East Africa partnered to bring together over one hundred academics and practitioners to discuss learning outcomes in Uganda. The event was graced by the State Minister for Primary Education, Hon. Rosemary Nansubuga Seninde, the Vice Chancellor of Kyambogo University and key national and international researchers.

Three keynote addresses were delivered by international speakers and 37 papers and 24 posters presented by academics and practitioners, including those who run schools. A range of issues were discussed including;

- the role of parents and the wider community
- the importance of strong school leadership
- the learning conditions/environment
- teacher motivation
- assessment and evidence on learning outcomes
- instructional practices
- the role of social and emotional learning
- the match of skills valued in education and the skills expected by the world of work

The backdrop for the conference is the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG4 around inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. Uganda fell short of meeting key targets in the education Millennium Development Goals, despite increased participation and increased government funding. To date, the country continues to register poor learning outcomes showing few signs of improvement. Participants at the conference attributed this to a range of educational challenges including; an examination-driven assessment system, lack of a relevant and meaningful curriculum, poor curriculum implementation, a deep lack of accountability, under-resourced learning environments, unmotivated teachers and a disengaged citizenry.

### Outcomes of the conference and participants' commitments

Some of the major emerging and recurring themes were around the purpose of education. Although there is now a global shift to focus on learning outcomes, we do not as yet have a sophisticated mechanism to understand and assess what going to school achieves for a child. It is tempting to focus on narrow, easily measurable learning outcomes at the expense of consideration of the purpose and impact of schooling.

Schooling, whether we like it or not, is not just about academic performance but it has an impact on the child's social and emotional wellbeing and health and other aspects of his/her development. The conference was presented with evidence that integrating social and emotional competencies in teaching and assessment, not only supports the wellbeing and psychological health of children, but it also reinforces

and enhances academic outcomes. Besides mental health promotion, social and emotional learning is relevant for educational outcomes, for employability prospects, and for addressing the global challenges in the promotion of sustainable development.

The conference also noted that children are leaving school without learning outcomes needed by the world of work. High academic qualifications are achieved without developing and demonstrating key job-related competences such as critical-thinking, problem-solving, creativity, entrepreneurship, teamwork and resilience, which have become even more essential. Conference participants strongly recommended that Uganda's education system should focus on preparing young people for the world of work and as global citizens who will help build Uganda as a modern and prosperous country.

Getting good information about the most important learning outcomes is a challenge requiring high quality assessment. In the context of Uganda's limited resources, getting such good information about the relationship between the resources used by education and the important learning outcomes (including practical skills, aptitudes and moral values) it achieves for our young people is a crucial step towards the much needed improvement and changes needed to achieve *Uganda Vision 2040*.

Conference participants made the following commitments as a means of taking forward the ideals of the gathering and playing their rightful role towards improving learning outcomes in Uganda:

1. Feeding ideas into the forthcoming national symposium on assessment and examinations to be hosted by Ministry of Education and Sports and other education agencies with support from DFID Uganda on 6-7 June 2017. The participants considered that the discussion about which learning outcomes are most important should go hand in hand with discussion about what outcomes are assessed and how these would drive teaching and learning. What is assessed and how it is assessed normally influences what and how teachers teach.
2. Producing a co-edited book that reaches a wide readership in Africa and the rest of the world on **how a focus on learning outcomes (rather than on inputs, processes, outputs) supports significant changes in the success of schools in the 21st century**. The book will be based on the following ideas:
  - a. The success of schools is not only the academic learning but also wider issues of the so-called soft skills or social and emotional learning and the skills needed by students as young citizens in a changing economy and a changing world
  - b. How to achieve successful schools is important across the world, not only in Africa
  - c. Effective approaches for increasing the success of schools are important to Ministries of Education and to other agencies supporting development in Africa
3. Continue doing research, trialing interventions of what might work in improving learning outcomes and make policy recommendations in the following key areas:
  - a. Rethinking the assessment system: to focus on learning outcomes beyond the grades and on developing effective measures for assessing important learning outcomes
  - b. Rethinking the focus of our education system/the curriculum to go beyond the cognitive and include higher order skills and social and emotional learning/soft skills.
  - c. Teacher Education/training and effective models for ensuring teacher education leads to student learning
  - d. School leadership that brings together all key stakeholders (parents, community and employers) to contribute to improving learning outcomes

- e. The role of the social environment (home/parental, community, business and local leadership) in improving learning outcomes

## Resolution

The conference participants pledged to take forward the commitments made above and to hold the conference every two years to reflect and share what has worked to improve learning outcomes.

## Proposals to the Minister of Education and Sports

*The conference participants propose that you use your office to:*

1. *initiate a review of curriculum implemented in current classroom practices to introduce more practical and social and emotional learning as opposed to academic drilling.*

While the thematic curriculum in use in the lower primary incorporates some themes on social learning such as living together, evidence presented during the conference demonstrates there is scope for an enhanced focus in practice on other skills such as critical-thinking, problem-solving, creativity, entrepreneurship, teamwork, personal development and resilience in the early years and throughout children's education.

2. *ensure wherever possible children's readiness for school and that teaching occurs at the right level.*

Conference participants noted with concern that the assumptions in the official curriculum may not align with the skills that most children have, meaning that teachers who follow the curriculum may leave many behind. For example, in literacy, the lower primary curriculum assumes that children who enroll for primary one are already fluent with sufficient vocabulary and that have the foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics and conventions of text and print. Participants thought that this assumption would only hold if all children 3-5 years attended pre-school where these skills are taught. Participants welcome the recently launched National Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy and call for its urgent implementation by ensuring a reception class is attached to every primary school.

3. *lead enhancement in Uganda's assessment and examination system so that the outcomes reflected in assessment are those best aligned with the needs of Uganda and its young people now and in the future.*

Conference participants welcomed the forthcoming national symposium on the current and future prospects of Uganda's assessment and examinations system. This symposium will bring together key stakeholders seeking to identify ways in which the assessment system can contribute to achieving Uganda Vision 2040.

4. *facilitate engaging employers, parents and the wider community in understanding the learning outcomes students achieve in primary, secondary and further education and training.*

Conference participants noted views of employers that many young people leave education and training without the skills and attitudes needed for success in employment now and in the future.