



Assessment Systems in Southeast Asia: Models, Successes and Challenges

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The demand for new knowledge and abilities to provide students the opportunity to develop their 21st century skills have driven nations in the Southeast Asian region to focus on ensuring that students learning can be improved and assessed effectively. The global market signaled education systems of nations to raise further the bar on quality and access to education, prompting them to work together and learn from each other.

According to Darling-Hammond and Wentworth (2010), in this era, students must possess skills which include “the abilities to find and organize information to solve problems, frame and conduct investigations, analyze and synthesize data, apply learning to new situations, self-monitor and improve one’s own learning and performance, communicate well in multiple forms, work in teams and learning independently.” Clearly, it is a challenging task for nations, especially those in the Southeast Asian region given the economic and political hurdles that they equally give importance to assessment of learning. SEAMEO INNOTECH and representatives from ten of the eleven member countries of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) – Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam, convened a regional workshop in 2012 to learn from each other, particularly in the area of assessment of students as a critical tool in maximizing learning and teaching. The workshop revealed that while curricular reforms have been periodically undertaken and are well articulated in all the member countries of SEAMEO, the assessment systems of each country need to be further strengthened and firmly established by instituting reforms by learning

from other another. SEAMEO member countries have taken bold steps, initiating discussion and work groups to share and understand how assessment systems in their own countries could be more relevant and responsive to the demands of the 21st century.

Assessment: Definition, Purpose and Scope

Learners' assessment has been extensively studied within the educational setting. Harlen (2008) and Mertler (2009) defined assessment as the process that teachers use to assign grades to students in particular subject assignments. Assessment can also refer to the standardized testing imposed in schools (Marzano, 2006; Stiggins & Chappus, 2005). Also, assessment has been described by Black and William (1998) as any activity intended to gather information to be used to provide feedback in order to modify teaching and learning activities in the schools or improve instruction and students' performance as discussed by Cohen and Hill (2000).

Assessment and examinations play a very important role in all education systems. Educational institutions put much importance on it as it is a means to gather information to improve learning and instructional practices. High performing nations particularly give special attention to assessment as seen in their consistent high ratings in international achievement tests which give premium to the full potential of student assessment.

From the various definitions shared by the regional workshop participants, SEAMEO member countries generally agree that assessment is a process and procedure of collecting and understanding data or information from students in a range of activities aimed at improving teaching-learning process and making decision and judgment on students' learning outcomes.

As for identifying the purpose of assessment, Gipps and Cummings (2003) argued that no assessment is considered good or bad as it is judged on how it satisfies its intended purpose. Based on the various descriptions provided by the workshop participants, it can be surmised that the purposes of assessment in each country are evidently anchored on its education strategic plan and/or agenda. For example, the Philippines' assessment system touches on the BESRA (Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda) while Singapore and Brunei are anchored on SPN21 (Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21 (National

Education System for the 21st Century) and curriculum initiatives, respectively. Hence, the assessment programs of SEAMEO member countries, particularly those at the school level, are meant to improve – processes of learning; processes of instruction; outcomes of learning and outcomes of instruction.

Most SEAMEO countries, excluding Brunei Darussalam and Singapore, conduct assessment using various measures and tools and examinations in all levels of education and school system from pre-primary, primary higher education which covers core, non-core and non-cognitive areas. The scope of assessment is either school-based or national examinations which are also customized based on the curriculum and standards of the respective nation. Brunei Darussalam and Singapore's assessment programs start in the primary level (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2015).

Assessment for Learning or *A/L* refers to the practices of teachers and education to carry out assessment aimed to determine progress in learning by giving tests and other tools to measure learning while the instructional program or process is going (Murray, 2006; Sparks, 2005). Countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore are stressing *A/L* as important purposes of their assessments.

Assessment of Learning (*AoL*) or commonly known as summative assessment pertains to the practices of teachers and school system to conduct assessment to determine the current standing of students' achievement against learning outcomes defined in the curriculum and in some cases, how they are placed in relation to others (Earl, 2005; Harlen, 2008). Countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam all highlighted this as a purpose of assessment.

Assessment as Learning (*AaL*) is the use of on-going self-assessment by students in order to monitor their learning (WNCP, 2008). The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are promoting assessment as learning. With the view of the learning process, learners or students are the critical corrections between assessment and learning (Earl & Katz, 2006).

Putting Large Scale and School-Based Assessment Results for Development

As an integral part of the curriculum in each member country, assessment in the Region may be categorized into Large Scale Assessment and School-based Assessment. Most large scale assessments are examinations given to measure completion and/or exit from one level to another and entry to a higher level in the education ladder. An example is the test given from Primary to Secondary and/or from Secondary to Higher Education. The Ministry of Education or Department of Education is usually tasked to oversee the planning, management and supervision of these assessment systems.

To complement the large scale national assessments, Southeast Asian countries also have School-based Assessment (SBA) systems carried out by teachers in schools to their own students or learners. The SBA is formative and diagnostic in nature which is intended to improve students' learning outcomes as well as provide immediate feedback to improve quality of learning, teaching and assessment. It is typically designed and implemented by students' own teachers, making it a highly valid form of assessment since teachers exactly know what and how to measure their students' learning.

During the workshop, a survey of strategies used in conducting assessments in various levels was conducted. The results of the survey showed that the strategies used in the region included the following: anecdotal records; written quizzes; worksheets/seat works; assignments/ projects; oral quizzes/recitations; observation checklists; portfolio assessments; performance assessments/ demonstration; peer assessment; self-assessment; and team assessments.

Each assessment system defines a specific role and use of the results of the assessment process. It also indicates different roles of government, the school, the teachers, the students, as well as the parents. The report underscored that SEAMEO member countries have taken significant strides to make meaningful use of assessment data and communicate these results to various stakeholders. Most of the countries agree that the main use of test data is to determine the level of competencies of learners. Specifically, national examinations are used to gauge students' aptitude and readiness in proceeding to a higher level of schooling. The test results also help educators, policy

makers and teachers design a more appropriate and responsive instructional program.

While assessment of students is a major concern, SEAMEO member countries put much premium on the professional development of teachers who are the key resources of the assessment system.

There is a general consensus of the need to further improve professional development of teachers in the area of assessment in both pre-service and in-service trainings as well as exposing and allowing them to participate in seminars, conferences and workshops. These development programs for teachers give them the opportunity to can share and gain new knowledge on innovations and best practices in learner assessment along with upgrading their skills in using new technologies as a means of providing assessment to students.

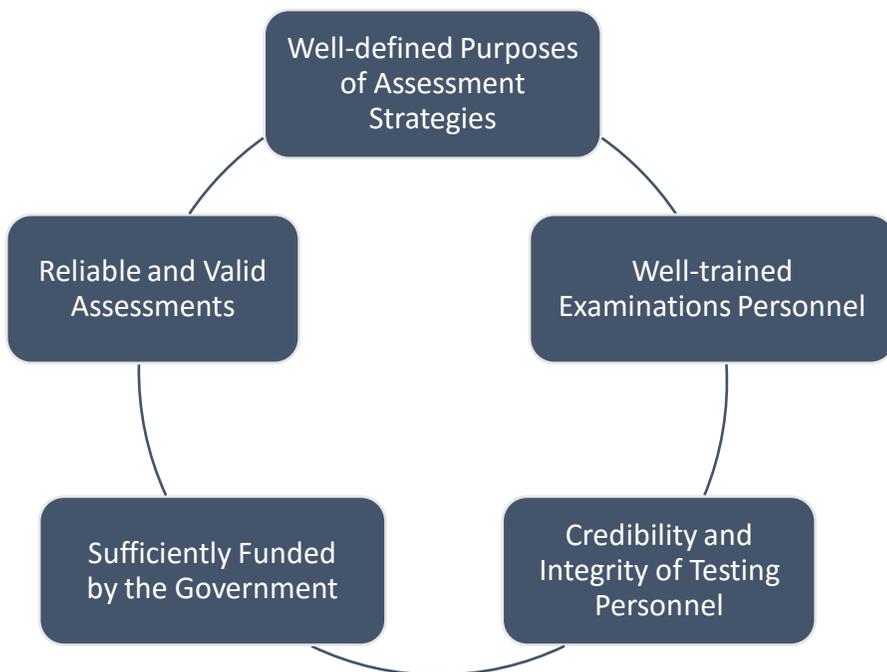


Figure 1. Elements of Good Assessment Practices

SEAMEO member countries identified five elements of good assessment practices (see Figure 1): i) well-defined purposes of

assessment strategies; ii) well-trained examination personnel; iii) reliable and valid assessments; iv) sufficiently funded by the government; and v) credibility and integrity of testing personnel is in place (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2015).

Taking Steps towards Assessment Reforms

SEAMEO member countries are increasingly focused on embracing a paradigm shift in terms of assessment purposes and approaches. Realizing truly the integration of assessment system into the instructional system, member countries represented at the workshop agreed that shifting to Assessment for Learning (*AfL*) and Assessment as Learning (*AaL*) from Assessment of Learning (*AoL*) is the way to go.

In Brunei Darussalam, an enhanced assessment system has been put into place by strengthening its integration into the teaching and learning process. As for Cambodia, the focus of assessment reform is in supporting the achievement of quality and efficiency in the delivery of education in the country which include, among others, the systematization of integration of assessment results into the grading system. The introduction of internal and external assessment in 2005 marked the reform of Indonesia's assessment system while Malaysia initiated its Holistic Assessment System (HAS) in 2011 which is referred to as National Education Assessment System for Primary and Lower Secondary Students.

On the other hand, Myanmar's assessment reform highlighted quality assurance by enhancing administrative processes aimed at improving quality of teachers and education of students. As for the Philippines, it is establishing a National Assessment and Grading System Framework which underscores the role of national examinations at each strategic stage of schooling, among other reforms, which are all anchored on the new K to 12 curricula. Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE), initiated the PERI Holistic Assessment in 2010, a significant assessment reform in the country to recognize and sustain the good assessment practices that improve the quality of learning and teaching in schools.

For other countries – Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam, reforms have centered on strengthening existing assessment systems and ensuring that the highest quality of assessment system is in place.

Striding Forward to Success In the Face of Issues and Challenges

So far, assessment systems implemented by countries in the Region have been relatively successful due to various reforms and improvement strategies that have made significant impact on their whole education system. Among the identified success factors include:

1. The importance of stable organizational structure that promotes sustainable programs, including research and development;
2. Supportive government and related agencies to implement the national assessment system; and
3. Well-crafted assessment frameworks and implementation mechanisms supported through legislation and education laws.

In spite of the bright prospects for assessment systems in SEAMEO member countries, issues and challenges continue to arise. As such, the challenge to establish an assessment system of integrity which is accepted by all examination stakeholders is a common challenge among countries like Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines and Singapore. Alongside this is the urgent need to address the recurring problem of cheating among some students during examinations.

Another challenge being faced are the doubts by some members of the public on the integrity high stakes examinations and the manner they are undertaken. Moreover, countries oftentimes find it difficult to ensure that an assessment program's purpose is well communicated to all its users. Countries are also sometimes confronted with a poor management of examination activities resulting in wastage of resources, mishandling of test materials and leakage and miscommunication, which undermine the reliability of assessment, as well as a lack of highly trained professionals in the field of education assessment.

Future Directions and Recommendations

The review of the assessment systems in the Region through the workshop initiated by SEAMEO INNOTECH generated the following recommendations for further strengthening of assessment systems:

1. Develop programs to help reduce the examination pressures faced by students which otherwise encourage a focus on passing the test rather than learning.

2. Create an assessment system that is responsive to the diverse needs of students such as inclusive education and student-centered curricular and instructional programs.

3. Craft an assessment system that covers a wider range of curriculum objectives and learning outcomes which promote critical and higher order thinking skills among students.

4. Ensure the balance between summative and formative assessments in the purposes of assessments.

5. Implement a programmed capacity building and professional development program in the region in lieu of the demand for more experts in the field of educational assessment.

6. Explore introduction of technology-supported assessments where appropriate.

7. Develop an assessment policy framework with assured funding support from the government.

SEAMEO member countries are committed to working hand-in-hand to support each country's educational reforms particularly in improving assessment systems. While Western and European counterparts have taken greater strides, Southeast Asian nations are evolving and catching up with the advances in this field notwithstanding the hurdles in streamlining and emulating the best practices in educational assessment.

Author's Note: The earlier version of this article was published as research brief for SEAMEO INNOTECH Research Updates. The full report is available at http://www.seameo-innotech.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/SIREP_Assessment-151021.pdf

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