# GUIDANCE: ASSESSING AND MONITORING LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

This guidance note aims to help UNICEF Education staff, Ministry officials and partners reflect on how to take account of learning through meaningful formative and summative assessment practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights general considerations and key actions that teachers, schools and Ministries of Education can undertake in the area of assessment to ensure the continuity of quality learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Implications of COVID-19 pandemic for assessment systems and practices

**Challenges for students to maintain achievement and develop new skills.** Distance learning programmes presuppose an already developed degree of autonomy for self-learning and self-motivation among students. Learning autonomy is important in distance learning but also in the classic learning environment, however, many children, particularly younger children, may not yet have developed sufficient autonomy for self-learning. Distance learning programmes lack mechanisms for teachers to assess and provide feedback and formative guidance to students. For example, television- or radio-based distance learning programme are uni-directional interfaces that do not offer opportunities for teachers to assess and correct students' learning pathways. When students lack regular feedback from teachers, they may fail to maintain their current learning levels and struggle to develop new knowledge and skills through self-learning, as required. The reopening of schools will come with uncertainty among teachers and students about how to return to normal instruction. Learning levels may have shifted or loss may have occurred, students will have endured varying levels of isolation and stress during the school closure and students and teachers will need to readapt to social life.

**Challenges for students to obtain end of cycle certifications.** Modifications of the school calendar may interfere with national summative assessment processes, including end of cycle examinations and certification processes. This may lead to increased stress among children and adolescents at the end of school cycles, reduce motivation to complete their school cycle and/or have long-term impact on children's academic progression if appropriate policies are not put in place. These challenges may disproportionately affect children from the most disadvantaged communities, who are already at risk of not completing basic education. To prevent this, compensatory assessment policies must explicitly take the most disadvantaged children into

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Assessment terminology

Formative assessment: Assessment conducted throughout the educational process with a view to enhancing student learning. It implies: eliciting evidence about learning to close the gap between current and desired performance (so that action can be taken to close the gap); providing feedback to students; and involving students in the assessment and learning process. (Source: CCSSO 2008).

Summative assessment: Assessment of learner's achievement at the end of a term, stage, course or programme usually, although not necessarily, involving formal testing or examinations. Summative assessment is most commonly used for ranking, grading and/or promoting students, and for certification purposes.

Source: UNESCO IBE. Accessed April 2020: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fr/node/12145

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account and ensure the same level of access and the same capacity to adapt to new assessments measures.

**Challenges for teachers.** New protocols for distance learning, online or otherwise, require teachers to rapidly change their practices, including daily tasks, responsibilities and accountabilities. Teachers may be asked to develop new alternative and varied approaches to monitor children's learning (from assessing to remediating learning losses) during the COVID crisis, including both formative and summative methods. Different methods may be required per grade and subject area for both individual and collective feedback and support. Teachers may lack relevant resources at home, training and experience, particularly on digital learning platforms. Some programmes may largely reduce the amount of time allocated to teacher-directed learning processes by focusing on children's self-learning. Upon return to school, teachers may also struggle to assess students' learning levels to identify whether students are on track, and any learning gaps or losses resulting from the school closure and for remedial actions. Such assessments may be critical in informing learning process and/or students' promotion, certification and access to higher levels of education.

**Challenges for schools.** Schools may be called on by the Ministry of Education or their own students to deliver and/or develop assessment resources through non-traditional channels, e.g. digital platforms, radio, etc., and or to push the development of home-based assessment, student self-assessment, especially in situations of protracted school closures. Such changes may represent major shifts in assessment culture for schools and parents. Schools may also be asked to establish a role for the school in assessing and ensuring accountability of teachers and family for children's learning. When schools reopen, schools may be asked to put in place special measures to assess learners' achievement levels after the school closure and to boost the learning of those who fell behind during the crisis; schools may find increased equity gaps between children who were able to access distance or online learning and those who were not. Depending on the nature and approach to schools reopening processes, schools may need to implement or develop modifications for school-level assessment systems.

**Challenges for system level and policymakers.** Policymakers at the national level may be confronted with a host of policy questions and needs for adaptations to standard assessment programmes and their link to accountability, funding and promotion. Ministries will be faced with decisions on whether examinations should be cancelled, postponed, maintained as scheduled or replaced by other forms of assessment, e.g. based on continuous assessment, if such measures were already in place. If postponed or cancelled, how can students be promoted? They will also face challenges on risk management and mitigation strategies/measures for face to face examinations within COVID-19 context. Ministries also face the challenge of measuring the reach, coverage, accessibility of distance teaching and learning programmes effectiveness in terms of children's learning. Ministries may face significant pressure from parents and students to address assessment concerns quickly. Schools, teachers and parents may also have unrealistic expectations of what students can achieve through distance learning, so efforts may be needed to manage those expectations.

## Key messages for assessing learning and practices during the COVID pandemic

Education systems should use the COVID crisis as an opportunity to transform existing assessment mechanisms and/or develop new practices, from the system to the classroom level, in parallel with developing stronger distance learning systems.

**Monitor learning throughout crisis.** Putting in place monitoring mechanisms in the midst of a crisis is difficult. It is particularly challenging to measure changes in learning outcomes given that no baseline data may be available. In an initial period, countries may consider developing procedures to measure proxies for the quality of the programmes, such as accessibility, alignment of distance learning to the curriculum and teacher/student engagement. Education officials must put in place monitoring mechanisms to monitor two key issues. Collecting information on these questions is critical for improving the quality of distance learning programmes, responding to students' needs and large losses in learning achievement upon the return to school. If technology is functional, SMS-or telephone-based surveys are a good option to measure the perception of actors (parents, teachers) and estimate the reach, access and use of the distance learning materials. This will allow refinement of programmes, better communications and better engagement, interest and motivation among those delivering the programme. However, perceptions of effectiveness may not replace measuring actual effectiveness in the medium to longer term.

Considerations:

- How effective are distance learning programmes according to the proxies mentioned above? How are wealthier students faring compared to less wealthy students?
- Are students maintaining/developing learning through distance medium(s)?
- How do end-users of distance learning programmes perceive its effectiveness?
- What tools can be used to collect information on effectiveness? How can all populations be reached?

**Reduce expectations for what and how much children can learn during COVID crisis period - Keep the stakes of assessments low.** Schools, teachers and students are undertaking assessment in crisis conditions. Thus, the nature, content and stakes of assessments should reflect crisis conditions. Children can and should not be expected to learn the same scope and

breadth of content as in non-crisis conditions. Notwithstanding the modifications and alternative approaches that can be put in place to mitigate the impact of the crisis, expectations of the outcomes of assessments during the crisis must be tempered. Countries, parents and students should not expect modified examinations to play the same role or have the same weight or consequences as assessments during non-crisis times. Whenever possible high-stake assessments should be postponed. Clear guidelines are required from Ministry to explain to schools, teachers, parents and students the protocols for assessment. Education systems in which student learning autonomy does not feature among the key skills developed should also place a particular focus on developing such learning skills in the medium to long term.

Considerations:

- Can high stakes assessments be postponed? What consequences will be attached to which kinds of assessment according to grades and learning domains?
- How can the stakes for all assessment types be reduced during the crisis?
- How can decisions over certification, school placement and promotion be deferred or decided through formative assessment methods – especially if transition to secondary school is selective?
- What are the equity concerns and risks associated with postponing or altering assessment programmes? How may wealthier students' access and perform compared to less wealthy students?
- When examinations go forward in person, what kind of risk management and mitigation strategies/measures can be put in place for face to face examinations within COVID-19 context?

**Prioritize formative assessment.** Children cannot and should not be expected to learn and progress across the intended curriculum through self-learning methods with few interactions from teachers. Distance learning programmes should integrate a formative assessment component, whereby students submit work to teachers and teachers provide individualized and/or collective feedback regarding learning content and student error patterns. This can be established through complementary communication elements between teachers and students (e.g. teachers checking in on students via mobile) or integrate a role for parents as facilitators. Expectations for formative assessment need to be clearly communicated to schools, teachers, students and parents. Teachers may use various channels to collect and assess children's work regarding learning areas targets and priorities: online platforms can be used, homework can be dropped off at a given location on a given day, according to local regulations or teachers can contact students' periodically. Protocols should be put in place when children are identified as not learning or not accessing distance programmes. Provide teachers with required training, particularly on digital competencies.

Considerations:

- Are teachers collecting or reviewing students work in any form?
- Are and how are teachers interacting with students? Are there meetings and or regular interactions (face to face, virtual or by text note) with teachers? With parents?
- What tools and support do teachers need to share effectively their recommendations and feedback for students?
- How do we ensure the credibility of formative assessment data? How will marks be awarded?

**Provide appropriate training and guidance for teachers and support for parents.** These rapid changes in required assessment practices of teachers presuppose that teachers have already developed specific competences, including their digital competences. As some education systems lag behind in developing such teacher competences, a special emphasis should be placed not only in developing the overall assessment competences of teachers but also on the specific competences that would enable them to function in multiple learning environments (including the online and distance learning and assessment of learning).Children/parents/guardians also need to be informed and get used to the new systems so that's another key challenge (and some may simply be unable to use them). Parenting education and counselling is key during the COVID crisis for the well-being, preservation of learning motivation and safety of their children going beyond their necessary involvement in the learning and assessment culture of schools. Countries without an integrated, cross-sector parenting education and counselling system should develop one; this is also an opportunity for schools to build stronger linkages with parents.

Considerations:

- What kind of training and support do teachers require to successfully implement distance learning and assessment practices? How can that training be provided? And to hard-to-reach areas?
- What kinds of information, support and or training to parents require? How can that support be provided? And to hard-to-reach families?

**Equity is critical to decisions on alternative assessment methods.** Summative assessments, particularly high-stakes examinations, are a critical part of educational culture in EAP. However, pressure to deliver examinations should not override equity considerations. Countries that have existing methodology and technology for managing computer-based tests may be tempted to apply them to examinations procedures during the crisis. However, there are many equity considerations that should be addressed before decisions are taken to move examinations online. When every child cannot access the examinations and/or when equal administration arrangements cannot be provided for every child, other strategies should be sought. Existing data on access of households to internet, such as from household surveys or MICS, and other communications channels should be used to assess reach of online alternatives. Postponement of examinations or using formative assessment methods to promote children.



Considerations:

- What percentage of children and adolescents in the country have access to computers, devices and internet to access the online examination and how does this vary by location and socio-economic group?

- Is the ICT infrastructure and internet broadband allow high level traffic during the online examination period?
- Will children and//or parents have the digital skills to access the examination?
- How secure is the on-line assessment – can we be sure that it is the student that is responding?
- What are the long-term implications of equity gaps in access?
- What about access for children with disabilities?
- How to ensure that tests are completed by the correct students and that fairness is maintained?

**Ensure quality in temporary assessment procedures.** To reduce stress among parents and students, ministries need to communicate clearly at system and district level on procedures for assessment. This is particularly true for the grades with high stakes examinations. Many options exist for adapting examination schedules to the school closures; modification of the school calendar, postponement of examinations or replacement of examinations with continuous assessment are some options. These options may be preferable than going ahead with high stakes examinations. If examination dates are maintained, adaptations or alternative channels, particularly computer-based solutions, should be thoroughly analysed for quality and equity implications. SMS- or telephone-based interaction could also help teachers to get feedback from their students/caregivers on their learning outcomes.

Considerations:

- Does sufficient technology exist to support online examinations? If not, what other channels could be used in the short term?
- Which examinations can be postponed? What are the guidelines to put in place in order to postpone examinations?
- Will putting examinations online signification alter the nature of the examination? For example, technology may not allow the marking of certain types of questions, such as long written responses.
- Should specific grades or subject area be prioritized for developing temporary assessment procedures?
- Is the quality of the temporary assessment sufficient to proceed with certification? Is the assessment fair and accessible to all students? If not, what are the alternative approaches?
- Prepare topology of solutions for the conduct of exams within COVID-19 context based on country preparedness, level of ICT infrastructure, security of exam test, validity and credibility of the entire process, risk of spreading the virus, etc.

**Reschedule data collection for international, regional and national large-scale assessment data collection.** Countries who had scheduled national learning assessments or other survey-based assessments can postpone data collection. The implications of such postponement should be discussed with sector groups and donors, where relevant. Other operations related to large-scale assessment preparation, such as analysis and reporting, are likely not to be disturbed by the school closures.

Considerations:

- Are any sector plan targets tied to data from national assessments? How can they be revised?

- Are any donor conditions reliant on data from national assessments? How can they be renegotiated?

## Key messages for assessing learning when children are 'Back to School'

**Assessment is central pillar in 'back to school' process.** The reopening of schools will come with uncertainty among teachers and students about how to return to normal instruction. Students and teachers will need to readapt to social life. A period of adjustment is important for schools and teachers to assess where students are and allow for students to adapt to the 'new normal' that may reign for some time after the return to school. Teachers should be encouraged to use low-stake formative assessment techniques to evaluate where children are. Expectations of returning to the regular school programme and pace should be adjusted accordingly. Different age groups and/or subjects may be prioritized depending on the context. For example, some countries may prioritize putting in place protocols for students in examination grades. Teachers should also be prepared to listen to the student's experience and needs through specific questions. Remedial programmes or catch-up progammes should be planned in all schools to respond to losses.

Considerations:

- How teachers can give additional support to children that have fallen furthest behind, for example, children with special needs, children from poor families without access to technology, for example?
- How will the effects of the school closure on students' learning be assessed?
- What protocols will be put in place for students who experienced a lag in learning?
- How will teachers be prepared to resume school assessments? Can teachers return to school slightly before children to allow them to prepare for incoming students and organize assessments?
- What are the gaps in learning levels between children once schools re-open (It may not be possible to ascertain if these gaps already existed prior to school closures, but will be important to determine nevertheless so provide additional support to children who are most behind, who may have had limited learning opportunities at home).