

**THE MALAWI NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS  
BOARD**

**ENSURING EFFECTIVENESS OF ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION IN  
ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GOALS: THE CASE  
OF THE MALAWI NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS BOARD**

**By**

**V. M. Chalila  
Deputy Executive Director**

**and**

**M. Nkhoma  
Acting Director Research and Test Development**

**The Malawi National Examinations Board**

**A paper presented at the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Association of Educational  
Assessment in Africa (AEAA)**

**25<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> August 2003**

**Cape Town, South Africa**

### **Abstract**

Schools in Malawi like in any other country are agents for achievement of educational, social and economic goals. These goals in a school context translate into a curriculum. Therefore, effective achievement of such goals depends much on how the school curriculum is delivered to the learner. Assessment and certification as part and parcel of the process of curriculum delivery if properly designed and carried out could facilitate achievement of the educational, social and economic goals of Malawi.

This paper discusses briefly the role of assessment in fostering achievement of these goals in the school context. Consideration has also been given to how Malawi National Examinations Board ensures quality assessment and certification of its candidates. Much as it tries to do so the Board experiences a lot of problems in the form of resources and expertise. The Board, being aware of the important role resources and expertise play in the delivery of quality service, is trying everything possible to address the situation.

## **1.0 Introduction**

This paper briefly covers how The Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) is trying to ensure effectiveness of assessment of candidates, the challenges it experiences in doing so and how it is trying to overcome the challenges.

Educational assessment is understood to be concerned with determination of progress that students have made towards educational goals at a particular time (Best, 1977) or understood to be an evaluation on the extent to which set out educational goals and objectives are met over a period of time (Odukoya, 1994). However, educational assessment without certification, especially on completing a recognizable level of education would have very little significance to a learner. Assessment and certification go together. A certificate serves as evidence that the holder successfully demonstrated to possess abilities measured by assessment instruments.

## **2.0 Assessment techniques used by Malawi National Examinations Board**

Examinations administered by The Malawi National Examinations Board assess the extent to which the cognitive capacities of a candidate have been developed. Consequently written examinations are the most dominant form of assessment. They use free response and multiple-choice questions. English, History, Bible Knowledge and Social and Developmental Studies have both free response and multiple-choice components at school certificate level. Biology, Physical Science, Home Economics, Agriculture, and Clothing and Textiles have practical form of assessment at school certificate level. One of the papers in French is orally assessed.

At Junior Certificate level, 14 of the 22 subjects have both free response and multiple-choice components. However, at primary level, each of the five subjects has a multiple-choice component besides a free response component.

### 3.0 National goals of education in Malawi

National goals of education in Malawi identify five categories of knowledge and skills; i.e. citizenship, ethical and socio-cultural, economic development, occupational and practical skills. *Citizenship skills* are meant to create awareness for unity, obedience, loyalty and discipline; development of spirit of tolerance, provide knowledge and understanding of the machinery of the government, etc. These skills are meant to prepare one for leadership roles in one's community.

*Ethical and socio-cultural skills* serve the purpose of making one aware of acceptable norms of behaviour and cultural practices of one's community. There are also *economic development skills* that an individual must acquire. The individual is made aware of sources of their economy and how it can be improved or protected. There are specific and effective methods and practices which individuals are supposed to be aware of if economic development is to take place. In addition to this an individual is expected to advance in life. Personal advancement can enhance individuals' contribution to national development in one way or another. It is through exposure to *occupational skills* that one can be prepared for one's personal advancement.

Health has a big role to play in national development. Therefore, learners must be equipped with skills for promoting good health. In the curriculum, such skills are classified as *practical skills*. They are about physical exercises, sports and recreation; hygiene, nutrition and sanitation.

The national goals of education translate into educational objectives, curriculum and classroom practice of a particular level of education be it primary, secondary or tertiary level.

#### **4.0 Role of Malawi National Examinations Board in facilitating achievement of national goals of education in Malawi**

In order for The Malawi National Examinations Board to play a role of a catalyst in achieving goals of education it capitalises on the translation of goals to classroom practice. By setting and administering high-stakes public examinations that are based on the school curriculum the Board is capable of providing the needed influence for achieving educational goals. It is a common belief that examinations exercise a strong influence on what is taught in schools (Kellaghan and Greaney, 1992).

High-stakes examinations are considered by many in Malawi to be a determinant of opportunities in life. Pupils who score high in public examinations are able to secure place for further education and usually stand a better chance of being employed. On the other hand teachers derive a lot of satisfaction out of good performance of pupils in public examinations. Examinations therefore become a driving force for both pupils and teachers to work hard in class. The end result of this motivation is teaching and learning of what is most likely to be covered by examinations.

The current impression is that teaching going on in schools is more to the examinations. The indicators of this status of teaching include the high demand for MANEB question papers in schools (pre-test or past papers). The teachers' aim is to use the papers to match their teaching with examinations or to predict what might come during examinations. In this respect teaching is focused on part of the curriculum they believe to likely feature in examinations.

It has also been observed that when MANEB changes examination format, school based assessment adopts MANEB examination format. When MANEB changed to multiple-choice format at JCE in 1995 assessment format in schools at this level was mostly multiple-choice to prepare pupils for that type of examination format.

The majority of applicants for training in marking of MANEB examinations have put 'improvement of their teaching' as a rationale for applying to participate in marking. Another reason, although not expressed, might be financial. However, their argument is that participation in marking of public examinations would provide them with an insight into how candidates should present responses to examination questions, how marking of candidates responses is done including mark allocation and what most common problems of candidates' work are. Teachers would apply such knowledge in their teaching to help candidates do well in examinations. From experience it can improve the performance of candidates in examinations.

Since examinations have the capacity of controlling the curriculum, the quality of teaching going on in schools would depend on quality of examinations. Examinations of low content validity would result in teaching that is focused on a small area of the curriculum. At the same time examinations whose questions are predominantly recall in nature influence teaching that emphasises factual knowledge.

## **5.0 How MANEB tries to ensure quality assessment**

High quality assessment is envisaged to be instrumental in achieving desired influence of the classroom practice. A well designed exam that assesses relevant knowledge and a wide range of cognitive skills can have a beneficial impact on teaching and learning (Chimwenje and Khembo, 1994). In trying to ensure quality assessment MANEB has set up quality control mechanisms in the entire process of assessment from test development, through out examination administration, up to processing and release of results.

### **5.1 Test development**

Test development phase of the assessment process is a crucial determinant of quality of both test items and assessment instruments. Construction of test instruments of high content validity and with higher order test items is the first step for sustaining effectiveness of assessment. Test development activities call for specialised skills and mastery of subject matter. MANEB draws upon the services of highly qualified and experienced practising teachers to write test items and develop assessment instruments.

Before engaging their services the test developers are trained for their responsibility. During training item writers are asked to design a content/specification grid for guidance in achieving validity of assessment instruments. Bradbury, (1997) observes that the emphasis should be on constructing items based on given data or situation from which the answer would come, real situations and realistic contents of relevance to Malawi and based on drawings, photographs, diagrams, maps, graphs, or tables. The item writers are supervised by specialist officers from MANEB.

Test development for MANEB involves item writing from a central point; editing, pre-testing and item review of multiple-choice items; moderation and proof reading.

## **5.2 Examination administration**

Examination administration compliments test development in enhancing effectiveness of assessment. Proper administration of assessment instruments protects their validity and reliability. Effective assessment should be able to promote valid and reliable decision making related to educational issues. MANEB orients, directly or indirectly, all the personnel involved in administration of examinations on procedures and regulations for proper conduct of examinations in order to safeguard high validity and reliability of examinations.

During writing of examinations MANEB officers joined by other stakeholders like Ministry of Education officials, officers from Office of President and Cabinet, Anti-corruption Bureau, etc. conduct spot checks to ascertain that procedures and regulations for proper conduct of examinations are not flouted. Spot checks are done in addition to deployment of police officers to provide full time security of examinations in examination centres and distribution points.

## **5.3 Processing of written scripts and results**

Unreliable scoring of candidates' work is another factor that can lead to low effectiveness of assessment. The Board tries to achieve reliable marking by training markers of its examinations especially at Malawi School Certificate level in order that they score

candidates' scripts to the Board's standards. Before live marking starts there is also standardisation in subject groupings so that markers interpret the marking scheme in the same way.

Marking is closely monitored by Chief and Senior Examiners. They sample 10% of each marker's work as marking proceeds. Unreliable markers are cautioned or discontinued from marking. Besides the Chief and Senior Examiners are script checkers who go through every script for errors. At the marking centre there is another quality control phase. It involves checking through mark sheets to verify that candidates' scripts for an examination centre have been marked and marks have been correctly entered. All this is done to minimise error contribution to the candidates' scores.

During data entry candidates' scores are verified by a second person to ensure that scores are captured correctly. First printing of results is carefully checked to ascertain that correct candidates' grades appear on the print-out.

#### **5.4 Ex-post facto analysis of examinations**

MANEB carries out *ex post facto analysis* of its examinations. Ex-post facto analysis provides an insight into the quality of the examinations as observed from the performance of candidates. The information arrived at is important for improving quality of future examinations. The analysis also assists to understand problems schools might have with preparing for students for examinations. Problems of tuition, resources (including time to cover syllabi) and calibre of candidates become apparent. Ex-post facto analysis gives a clear picture of the capacity of schools in providing education to children. It can be a very useful source of information for examination reforms and review of education policies.

#### **6.0 Constraints and challenges MANEB experiences in ensuring quality of assessment**

As MANEB tries to ensure quality of assessment it is experiencing challenges of different types. These challenges are in terms of funding, resources, capacity building, assessment techniques and examination malpractices.

## **6.1 Funding**

MANEB is a government sub-vented institution. The major source of fund is Government and funding ceilings are usually far below projected expenditure. Some funding is generated through examination fees, aptitude testing and other services sought from the Board by other institutions. All the same this does not make up for the shortfall. The dire consequence of inadequate funding over the time has been failure to assess projects in Agriculture and Geography. It has also resulted in phasing out projects as a mode of assessment.

Also affected is the number of papers in several subjects at MSCE level. Physical Science has been reduced to two papers from four, Biology from four to two, English from four to two, etc. Phasing out of projects and reduction of number of papers does not afford MANEB the opportunity to assess a wide range of knowledge and skills. It also restricts innovations to enhance effectiveness of assessment.

## **6.2 Resources**

The resource shortfall is in human, equipment and books. Candidature has increased tremendously over the last ten years but resources have not expanded by the same margin. This has a negative impact on quality of assessment through test development, examination administration and processing of scripts and results. The small human resource available is over-stretched and has little time for developmental issues of the functions of the Board.

The quality of work also depends on the quality and quantity of tools to work with. The tools include computers, reference books and other utilities whose adequate supply is vital for quality assessment.

### **6.3 Capacity building**

Effective assessment in education demands skilful and trained personnel (Sevor 1994). Professional knowledge and skills are dynamic. Officers' competence gaps do exist due to the dynamic nature of knowledge and skills. The gaps need filling to match the changing trends of knowledge and skills related to officers duties.

### **6.4 Assessment techniques**

The national goals of education in Malawi encompass development of cognitive, affective and practical skills. There is no single system of assessment that can effectively be used to determine to what extent learners' cognitive, affective and practical skills are developed. MANEB uses pencil and paper form of assessment. Therefore MANEB assesses scholastic skills more than the others. It falls short of measuring skills that cannot be measured by pencil and paper. It follows that the form of assessment can competently facilitate achievement of selected goals of education.

### **6.5 Examination malpractice**

Like several other examinations Board in Africa, MANEB is also grappling with examination malpractices whose effect is devastating to the education system and the nation as a whole. It makes examinations to be impotent tools for facilitating quality of education and achievement of national goals of education. This is spreading to fraudulent certificates.

### **7.0 How MANEB is overcoming the constraints and challenges**

MANEB has been proactive in trying to find solutions to the constraints and challenges it experiences in assessment. In some cases it is succeeding while in others it has a long way to go. It has to keep fighting to sustain effectiveness of assessment in facilitating achievement of goals of education.

### **7.1 Improvement of the financial base**

Indeed being a sub-vented institution improvement of funding levels depends on the understanding of Government on implications of under-funding MANEB. The Board has been aggressive enough to make authorities understand its plight. Sometimes the authorities have yielded to its favour. However, this kind of understanding is unpredictable and therefore unreliable. There is need for a regular and reliable financial base. Probably it should be thinking of broadening its financial base through consultancy in research, computer and examination services on a larger scale. Printing service is a possibility but it has security implications.

### **7.2 Improvement of the resource base**

The Board contracted Department of Human Resource Development for consultancy to review the structure of MANEB. The review is evaluative in nature. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations will include broadening the human and material resource base. Existing vacancies are being filled but controlling factor is funding.

The Board is trying everything possible to solicit support from well-wishers for equipment and books. Such efforts paid off when USAID donated computers to the Computer Services Department. It has continued to receive computers from different sources. The Board continues to seek such support even for books.

### **7.3 Capacity building**

For the last three years the Board has been active in long, medium and short term capacity building activities within and outside the country. Some of these lead to doctorate and master degrees. UPIC/UMASS is funding training abroad. It has also funded local short-term training. The Board is encouraging capacity building at all levels.

#### **7.4 Diversification of modes of assessment**

The Board needs to devise an assessment system that can comprehensively assess candidates' acquisition of knowledge and skills within the framework of the national goals of education. The Board should explore possibilities of using school based continuous assessment. School based continuous assessment can assess objectives that cannot be assessed using pencil and paper technique. Unfortunately there is no policy that covers continuous assessment in schools. Every school does it their on way.

#### **7.5 Measures against examination malpractice**

Examination malpractices have been there for sometime. The malpractices culminated in mass leakage of 2000 MSCE examinations a result of which the examinations were called off. With that incident the Board has stepped up security of examinations within the Board premises during test development; in the field too during delivery and administration of examinations. The security includes creation of security zone of offices involved in test development and police searching everybody accessing these offices during test development phase. Distribution centres have been established where examination question papers are kept for collection and written scripts returned by the examination centre on daily basis. During movement of examination question papers and written scripts police personnel are deployed to provide the needed security. Distribution centres are manned by police for 24 hours.

The Board also conducts spot checks to monitor proper conduct of examinations in the centres. It is assisted by other stakeholders.

The Board has gone further to civic educate the public against examination malpractices. It has done so through awareness campaigns on the radio, local TV and also through big walk and drama groups.

The efforts of the Board to provide security, has paid dividends. Examination leakage has not been heard of in the last three years of examinations. However, there are elements of cheating occurring in the examination halls. Such cases lead to disqualification of a

candidate in the entire examinations if it involves introduction of reference materials in the examination hall. If it is copying from each other the candidates are disqualified in that examination. If the examination malpractice involves the whole cohort of candidates, the centre could be deregistered for a number of years. Legal measures have also been taken against some candidates or persons involved in some forms of examination malpractice. Teachers have been interdicted for being involved in examination malpractice.

In trying to ensure quality of assessment the Board will, in 2003, for the first time administer examinations to candidates at cluster centres. Cluster centres will accommodate a number of schools to take examinations together. The arrangement in the hall is expected to minimise cheating.

As regards fraudulent certificates the Board has introduced a new certificate with security features that cannot be copied.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

Assessment and certification as discussed can facilitate achievement of educational, social and economic goals of Malawi. The driving force is the thinking that assessment and certification create greater life opportunities, i.e. employment and other occupations. The experience in the country is a number of people are re-sitting examinations to improve their grades. The belief is that a better certificate provides prospects of upgrading or promotion for those in employment. Prospective parliamentary candidates go sitting examinations to obtain a certificate; one of the conditions for registration as a political candidate for elections.

MANEB capitalises on the potential examinations have in improving quality of classroom practice to achieve national goals. It has the responsibility of sustaining quality of assessment. It needs to keep on exploring the possibilities of improving its current assessment capacity in order to assess a wider range of skills within the frame work of the national goals.

## References

- Best, J.W. (1977): Research in Education New Jersey. Prentice Hall
- Brudbury, R. (1997): Primary Science School Leaving Examinations (Abstracts). In Bude U. and Lewin K. Improving Test Design; Vol. 1 – Constructing Test Instruments, Analysing Results and Improving Assessment Quality in Primary Schools in Africa. Bonn, Druckerei Brandt GmbH.
- Chimwenje, C., and Khembo, D. J. (1994): The Role of Examinations in Educational Change: Malawi's Experience with Examination Reform. A Paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of Association for Educational Assessment in Africa. Unpublished.
- Kellaghan and Greaney (1992): Using Examinations to Improve Education: A Study in Fourteen African Countries. Washington DC. World Bank
- Ministry of Education and Culture (1991): Malawi Primary School Teaching Syllabus, Agriculture. Domasi. Malawi Institute of Education.
- Odukoya, D. (1994): Educational Assessment as a Catalyst for National Development. A Paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of Association for Educational Assessment in Africa. Unpublished.
- Sevor, L.S. (1994): Capacity Building for Educational Assessment in Africa. A Paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference of Association for Educational Assessment in Africa. Unpublished.