

YES Perspectives: A Series on Youth Employment and Skills Policies

Implementing Uganda's revised lower secondary curriculum: the experiences of teachers and learners in review

POLICY PAPER – UGANDA

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A teacher facilitates a lesson at one of the secondary schools in Central Uganda.

Abstract

In 2020, Uganda rolled out a competency-based and learner-centered curriculum for lower secondary education. To prepare teachers to implement the revised curriculum, the government trained 35 percent of the in-service teachers, who were in turn expected to train the remaining 65 percent of teachers through a cascade model arrangement. Effective implementation of the revised lower secondary curriculum holds great promise for equipping Uganda's young generations with the essential skills and competencies required for the evolving world of work. However, a mini-survey to examine teacher experiences in delivering the new curriculum and student experiences in learning the new curriculum revealed significant challenges, including the quality of student work, insufficient ICT equipment, confusion over project work, weak parental support, and more—all of which undermine the potential benefits of the curriculum.

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Background

In 2020, the Ministry of Education introduced a revised lower secondary curriculum, a significant shift from the previous, theory-oriented curriculum to one that places a high value on skills and competencies. According to the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), the revised curriculum is competency-based and fosters self-reliance by encouraging students to explore their creativity and ability to innovate. This new approach to learning equips students with lifelong skills, paving the way for improved teaching and evaluation methods, all designed to help students realize their full potential and feel excited about their learning journey.

The revised curriculum underscores the importance of research and project work at the end of each topic, ensuring the application of knowledge and skills rather than mere acquisition (Atwine et al., 2023). This research component allows students to expand their knowledge base, improve their notes, and engage in discussions with their peers. Project work is designed to involve every learner, and they are evaluated through activities of integration (AOIs), contributing to their scores at the end of the O-level cycle. AOIs refers to comprehensive, project-based evaluations that integrate various subject competencies, ensuring students apply what they have learnt in a practical and cohesive manner. The evaluations are crucial in the assessment of student learning and skills acquisition.

The thoroughness of this evaluation process, designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topics, should give stakeholders confidence in the effectiveness of the new curriculum. Additionally, the revised curriculum advocates integrating digital technology in teaching and learning, a crucial aspect of preparing a workforce ready for the fourth industrial revolution. The new curriculum introduces a pedagogical framework that requires teachers to integrate ICT to facilitate interactive, digital, and self-paced learning, thereby shifting from a knowledge transmission mode of teaching to a more active learning approach, where students think independently, solve problems, and make informed decisions. This new approach empowers learners to be knowledge creators while teachers facilitate learning, a departure from the old curriculum where teachers were seen as the sole source of knowledge.

Given the crucial role of teachers as facilitators for the revised lower secondary curriculum, NCDC organized face-to-face training to prepare them for implementing the curriculum. Due to the inadequacy of resources, the training followed a cascade model in which face-to-face training covered 35 percent of the teachers, who then served as master trainers who trained the remaining 65 percent of teachers. However, the training has been deemed inadequate, as information transferred from master trainers to trainees often became “adulterated,” leading to its ineffectiveness. Furthermore, schools and managers were also ill-prepared to implement the revised curriculum.

Objectives of the study

Despite these shortcomings, the revised curriculum has been implemented since 2020, and the pioneer students are expected to sit their final exams this year. Therefore, this policy paper aims to:

- Assess the status and progress of implementation of the revised lower secondary curriculum.
- Gather the experiences of teachers and learners in the implementation of the revised lower secondary curriculum.
- Assess teachers' retooling needs for the smooth implementation of the revised lower secondary curriculum.

Methods and data sources

The study was qualitative, relying on desk reviews and a mini-survey carried out by the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) in collaboration with the African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET) through the Youth Employment and Skills chapter of the Pan-African Coalition for Transformation (YES-PACT).

- **Desk reviews.** To examine the status and progress of implementing the revised lower secondary curriculum, the study relied on a review of existing literature and policy documents, notably the *Lower secondary curriculum framework 2019 – An assessment of quality of education provision in secondary schools in Eastern Uganda* (MOES, 2023) as well as literature from newspapers and unpublished documents shared by Ugandan chapter members of YES-PACT.
- **Mini-surveys.** A mini-survey was conducted to collect the experiences of teachers who received face-to-face training, the experiences of teachers trained by master trainers, and learners' experiences of the revised curriculum. The survey also gathered information on the challenges faced by teachers and solutions proposed to ensure effective implementation of the revised curriculum. The interviews were conducted as focus group discussions for teachers and students, and key informant interviews for school administrators such as headteachers, deputy headteachers and directors of studies. Data were collected from 17 schools (9 private, 8 government schools) purposively selected from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas of Western, Eastern and Central Uganda (Table 1). The data were analyzed qualitatively through themes (assessment, projects, activities of integration, ICT, research and retooling, and challenges) and reported in those categories. (Teachers who received face-to-face training, teachers who received training from master trainers, and learners studying the revised curriculum) backed with verbatim quotations and statements from participants.

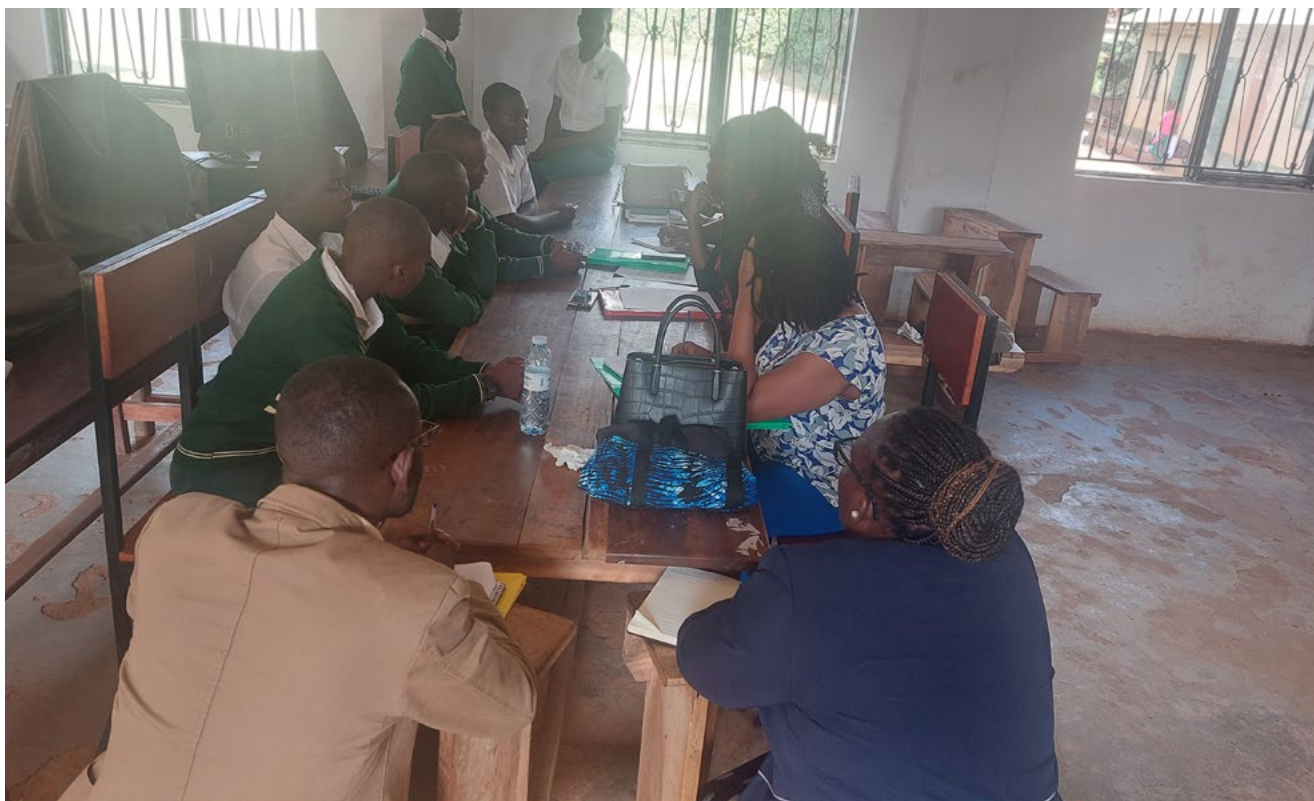
Table 1: Summary of the schools visited, their status, and location

	School	School status	Location
1	Kasangati High School	Private	Central Uganda
2	Hannah High School	Private	Central Uganda
3	Lubiri High School	Private (under Buganda Kingdom)	Central Uganda
4	Lukalu Secondary School	Government and USE	Eastern Uganda
5	Fountain of Hope Secondary School	Private	Eastern Uganda
6	Kakira High School	Government and USE	Eastern Uganda
7	Namutumba Seed School	Government	Eastern Uganda
8	Mooni High School	Private	Eastern Uganda
9	Bugwere High School	Government and USE	Eastern Uganda
10	Gayaza C/U Secondary School	Private	Central Uganda
11	St. Gyaviira High School	Private	Central Uganda
12	Holy Family Secondary School	Government	Central Uganda
13	Kaloke Christian High School	Government	Central Uganda
14	Nyarubanga Vocational Secondary School	Private	Western Uganda
15	Nyakayojo Secondary School	Government and USE	Western Uganda
16	Nyamitanga Secondary School	Government	Western Uganda
17	Crested High School	Private	Central Uganda

Source: EPRC, 2024



Teachers gathered at Bugwere High School in Eastern Uganda for training conducted by Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEb) officials on student assessment under the revised lower secondary curriculum.



YES-PACT members interact with students at one of the schools visited in Central Uganda.

Research findings

Experience of teachers who received face-to-face training

NCDC organized refresher training on the revised curriculum using a cascade model. The initial training was crucial in introducing the teachers to the revised curriculum and creating different platforms for continuous learning. It adequately covered the teaching methodology and introduced updated teaching materials, resources, and strategies for an interactive learning experience for students.

However, the training was generalized, covering humanities, arts, and sciences for all teachers rather than subject-specific training. The training covered ICT integration, research, lesson plans, presentations, assessment, scenario setting, and integration activities. Yet, master trainers feel that it would have been more beneficial if each teacher had been trained in the subject they teach, as noted below.

“The training grouped us according to humanities, sciences and art departments. I wish it were subject-specific because when we came back, it was challenging to use the examples they used in different subjects.”

Most participants indicated the training on assessment needed to be more thorough, as the focus was on methodology. This left a huge gap in how to award scores for projects, AOIs, and end-of-cycle assessment. One of the participants indicated that:

“The mode of assessment has continued to confuse teachers. Up to now, teachers are still struggling with scoring assessments and project work, and UNEB has yet to train us, but we are running out of time.”

The training emphasized that learners should not fail. For example, using the RACE assessment method, a student who writes their name gets 3 out of 10 marks, which some teachers believe has promoted laziness among learners. (RACE stands for relevance, accuracy, coherence and excellence. It is a tool for assessing an activity of integration.)

“They told us that you cannot give a student zero, and students are aware of this, which has made them very lazy because they know you can't give them zero.”

Participants also noted the need for more time to research and present their findings for discussion, given the limited resources. Additionally, the content could be more straightforward for the learners to understand as the complex concepts of Senior.3 and Senior.4 were shifted to Senior.1 and Senior.2.

Teachers reported numerous errors in textbooks from the different publishers and learning materials shared by NCDC, indicating that NCDC needed to consistently prompt the many publishers to be more consistent, and avoid creating confusion for teachers.

“The prototypes had very many errors; even the current textbooks we have here have errors and are not enough.”

The master trainers have done an incredible job of retooling other teachers through workshops and peer learning but faced resistance from those still comfortable with the old curriculum.

“We faced a lot of teacher resistance and had to sit in their classes to ensure they were teaching the revised curriculum. They did not want to lose face because, in the old curriculum, they were the custodians of knowledge.”

The master trainers indicated that they relayed information they did not fully understand from their first training since the first trainers from NCDC also appeared not to understand or be conversant with the new curriculum. In addition, teachers have continued to interact with different facilitators who share contradictory information.

“The first training was full of confusion. You could ask a question, and the trainers would say, ‘Let’s first leave issues at that level’ without giving clear answers. As time progressed, you could see that the trainers’ quality improved.”

Parents were also resistant to the changes and unwilling to provide the materials needed by their children, especially for project work. In addition, teachers showed concern that most parents do not understand how learners are assessed, which has forced some schools to give end-of-term exams even though the revised curriculum bans teachers from giving tests and exams. According to a Ministry of Education assessment in 2023 of the quality of education provision in secondary schools in eastern Uganda, 49.4 percent of schools adequately handled school-based assessments with end-of-topic evaluation evidence. However, some schools are still stuck on monthly tests and term exams to provide accountability to parents.



A teacher displays a solar dryer made by his students as a school project.



Discussion with Western and Central Uganda teachers during the mini-field visit.

“Parents’ attitude, especially regarding projects, is that they are unwilling to contribute to buy materials. We let learners do what is within their means.”

“Parents don’t understand the scores, which has caused problems.... We have to keep converting back to percentages which they are used to.”

Experience of teachers trained by master trainers

Most teachers received training from master trainers at the school level in workshops supported by continuous peer-to-peer learning. This process has helped teachers understand the basics of the revised curriculum, how to engage learners, and how to set scenarios. However, these teachers also feel that the training would have been more effective if it had been subject-specific.

“They trained us using their subjects and examples, so the training was insufficient.... We need training for the specific subjects.”

The cascade model of training prevented teachers from getting first-hand information, creating confusion due to contradictory instructions from different master trainers. In addition, the participants noted that master trainers expected them to understand quickly; they did not give the training enough time and did not want to be challenged. Every teacher needed face-to-face training, as one of the participants put it, “Akudilamu oluyimba taluwomya,” meaning that second-hand information is impure and cannot be trusted.

“We have different facilitators who give contradictory information. Very few teachers have first-hand information, so we get confused by facilitators.”

“The other challenge is that master trainers are behaving like small gods. You must do what they tell you even if you think it’s wrong or have researched and found some new information. They don’t want to be challenged.”

Assessment remains the biggest challenge for most teachers and the master trainers. Awarding scores for AOIs, projects, and generic skills in and outside class needed to be made more uniform during the training. As one of the teachers explained,

"I don't know how to assess; you know it's out of a certain percentage, but you don't know how much to award. So, I will cheat the students or give them more than they deserve."

Project work is being done in several schools. However, most teachers reported that it is cumbersome. Teachers feel it is daunting for one teacher alone to carry the details of the whole project for classes with vast numbers of students. It also takes time to sort student ideas and approve each idea as a project. Some teachers are also unsure about specific ideas that could qualify as projects. Controversy still arises about whether students should work in groups or as individuals to accomplish projects. The individual approach has been reported to be more authentic and engaging for each learner. However, many individuals end up with similar ideas and there is duplication of project reports. It is also much more demanding for teachers. The group approach lightens the teacher's load, but some students remain dormant and inactive, riding on other group members' efforts. Besides, UNEB is yet to clarify whether projects should be individual or group work.

"There are many [unanswered] questions, and we don't know how to proceed with the projects. Is it one project per student, one project per subject, or a group project? We need these questions answered and soon."

Although teachers are required to integrate more ICT skills into lesson planning and delivery, they report that ICT integration is still an uphill task due to insufficient resources such as a limited number of computers and in most schools a lack of internet connectivity.

"We have a computer laboratory, but it's not connected to the internet.... As teachers, we have not received ICT training, not even the basics, and we don't have time and resources to acquire these skills on our own."

There are other ways teachers, schools, and learners can integrate ICT usage, including using phones, radios, projectors, and television. In some schools, teachers told us they were using their phones to access the internet and conduct research at their own cost. Students are not allowed to have a phone or a radio. In schools where day scholars were implored to use their parents' phones whenever they were at home, many students said their parents did not own smartphones.

Other challenges identified by teachers in implementing the revised curriculum include the following.

- **Funding needs.** The revised curriculum is project-based and requires extensive funding to enable schools to acquire the necessary tools, such as computers, internet access, and other materials.
- **Instructional material scarcity.** The scarcity of instructional materials has forced some teachers to use the old curriculum because they cannot afford textbooks for the revised curriculum. This is more pronounced for language subjects such as Kiswahili and Luganda as no textbooks were provided by NCDC.
- **Inadequate training.** Some schools still teach the old curriculum because teachers were not effectively trained to implement the new curriculum.
- **ICT integration remains the biggest challenge.** ICT is the main ingredient of the revised curriculum; however, access has remained an uphill task for teachers and students. Besides challenges of access to equipment, teachers are not skilled in using the computer, let alone integrate it into lesson delivery. Students do not have an opportunity to learn this important skill due to inadequate equipment and teachers' knowledge.



A typical computer lab in some schools visited. Lack of ICT equipment means schools cannot sufficiently integrate ICT in their teaching, as required by the new curriculum.

Experience of learners

The study focused on learners in lower secondary schools using the revised curriculum. In most of the schools visited, a mixture of learners from levels S.1 to S.4 were selected to share their experiences. According to the learners interviewed, the new curriculum is challenging because the content requires much time to comprehend, and scenarios are difficult to understand. However, they also reported that it helps them express their ideas without fear, share knowledge, and work in groups rather than depend entirely on teachers. Making notes has helped learners become self-driven, and presentations have been critical in building their confidence. In addition, project work has exposed them to practical skills that are useful for solving daily problems. As some learners explained:

“In project work, you must solve a community problem. Our project was to make cheap liquid soap, and even the school supported us. Now we are making money.”

Learners engage in research and take notes. They work in groups and present their findings for each topic, adopting roles such as chairperson and secretary to represent the group, and ensuring that everyone participates. After the presentations, teachers discuss more information to refine understanding. Many learners depend on the few textbooks in a school library for research, which are often outdated, due to the absence of computers and internet connections. Because of this limitation, some teachers opt to dictate notes for the learners.

“..... when all groups have presented their findings, and some notes are missing, the teachers give us more notes. A few times, teachers dictate notes when we can't do research.”

For project work, learners are given a theme to identify a community problem and write a proposal. While teachers approve proposals, materials for projects are often expensive, posing a challenge. Some parents are unwilling to give financial support, hence students opt for projects that require cheap or freely available materials. Notably, students need to be made aware of how many projects are expected of them and whether projects should be individual or group-based.

Learners complete activities of integration after every topic and are awarded marks. In case an AOI is failed or missed, students are given a chance to redo AOIs from the same topic to compensate.

“An AOI is like an exam and is done individually. When you are absent and miss it, or you do it and fail, you are given a re-do of up to two chances. If you fail the second chance, then they take your highest score.”

ICT integration remains challenging. Although schools have computer laboratories, the number of computers is often inadequate and many teachers lack basic ICT skills. Learners indicated that ICT lessons and computer lab access are reserved for ICT elective learners. This leaves many learners without an opportunity to acquire basic ICT skills due to the limited number of computers compared with the huge number of learners.

“We don't get the chance to do practicals in the computer laboratory because we are many and the computers are few. Last term, I went to the computer laboratory only one time, to do the practical exam.”



YES-PACT field members, Uganda chapter, in discussion with teachers at Hannar High School Wakiso.



YES-PACT members interact with teachers.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Teachers and learners have generally welcomed the revised lower secondary curriculum. Although the initial training conducted by NCDC to help teachers implement the curriculum had some gaps, teachers have continued to learn from each other how to roll out the curriculum. Despite their efforts, several challenges persist, including a lack of subsequent training, insufficient parental support, inadequate ICT resources and limited internet connectivity. The following recommendations are proposed to address these issues:

- **Provide continuous teacher retraining.** UNEB and NCDC should provide continuous and comprehensive training in project work and assessment, as many teachers reported the need for clarity in these areas. Future training should consider subject-specific workshops to give teachers real, subject-based examples.
- **Train teachers in ICT before they teach students.** ICT is the main ingredient of the revised curriculum. All teachers should be retooled with basic ICT skills before they can be charged with teaching and integrating ICT into lesson delivery.
- **Fast-track teacher training on awarding and submitting scores.** UNEB should fast-track and expedite the process of teacher training on methods for awarding and submitting scores. Many teachers are uncertain and need clarification about the proper procedure to award and submit scores. As pioneer students of the curriculum get closer to ending their O-level cycle, timely support is crucial to ensure accurate and fair assessment.
- **Streamline expectations regarding project work.** UNEB and NCDC should streamline their expectations to eliminate confusion and provide clear guidelines for project work. Teachers reported needing clarification on the number of projects and the modalities of project work. This needs to be cleared up soon, since learners are preparing for end-of-cycle exams.
- **Engage parents.** Through the Ministry of Education and Sports, the government should sensitize parents about the revised curriculum's essence, expectations, and requirements. This can be done through media campaigns on radio and television. It would be critical to inform parents of the requirements of some aspects of the curriculum in which learners need support. Thus, awareness campaigns can inform parents about what is expected and necessary for their children's success.
- **Regulate publishers.** The Ministry of Education and Sports and NCDC should work closely to intervene and guide textbook publishers to agree on the information to be published. This will prevent errors and incorrect information from reaching learners and misleading teachers, ensuring the accuracy and quality of educational materials.
- **Support teachers of arts subjects.** Particular attention and additional training should be given specifically to teachers of arts subjects. Art teachers appear to lag behind their science counterparts, who have received more training and benefitted from the Secondary Science and Mathematics Teachers program. Targeted support can help bridge this gap and ensure all teachers are equally equipped to deliver the curriculum.

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