



WG/GAML10/MS/4

EXPERIENCE OF LESOTHO WITH AMPL IMPLEMENTATION

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1. Lesotho Basic Education

Education in Lesotho is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), which oversees all education programmes from early childhood to tertiary level. For many years, the school-level education system in Lesotho followed a 7-3-2 formal education structure. Primary school had an official entry age of six and a duration of seven grades. Primary school was sometimes further divided into lower primary (grades 1-4) and upper primary (grades 5-7). Secondary school was divided into two cycles: lower secondary consisting of Grades 8 - 10 and upper secondary consisting of Grades 11 - 12. In principle, primary school is free and compulsory. Students sat for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of Grade 7, the Junior Certificate Examination at the end of Grade 10, and the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (an O-level qualification which was later localised to the current Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education/LGCSE) at the end of Grade 12 in order to gain access to post-secondary education. The academic year is broken down into four terms which start in January and end in December (UNESCO IBE, World Data on Education. Revised 8/2010, cited in Education Policy and Data Center).

However, in 2009, as a way to actualise the mandate of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which calls for the need to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, Lesotho reviewed her education system and the review gave birth to Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP), which emphasises strengthening efforts towards learner retention in school until they have completed uninterrupted ten years of basic education. Additionally, the PSLE was phased out in the year 2017. In its place, the MoET introduced a non-selection End-of-Level Test, with the purpose of measuring the level at which learners are, in their learning as they proceed to the secondary phase. This information is then recorded and shared with the schools they are proceeding to in order to inform the teachers who will be receiving them.

Subsequently, to make way for learners to branch into the envisaged three pathway model (Academic, Vocational and technical streams), in 2021, the JC examinations were also phased out. Following these changes, the current arrangement constitutes seven (7) years of primary education and four (4) years of the secondary phase. Learners take the Grade 7 End-of-Level Test at Grade 7 and then the LGCSE examination at Grade 11. The MoET later introduced a Reception class (Grade-R) in selected pilot schools with the purpose of making transition to Grade 1 smooth. Plans are under way to introduce an advanced-level qualification in Grade 12.

2. The Examinations Council of Lesotho

The Examinations Council of Lesotho (ECOL) was established by the Examinations Council Regulations of 1986 as a Unit of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) responsible for administering public examinations. Along the years, with reforms to the education system, the mandate of ECOL expanded from just the administration of examinations to include other

assessments, such as the Lesotho National Assessment of Educational Progress and any other research as may be deemed necessary by either MoET or ECoL.

3. The Lesotho National Assessment of Educational Progress

The Lesotho National Assessment of Educational Progress was introduced to monitor the performance of the basic education system on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Training. The survey was initiated in 2003 as a pilot and then a baseline in 2004, following the introduction of the Free Primary Education (FPE) initiative in 2000. The study, as conducted every two years by the ECoL Research and Statistics Unit, aims to identify and flag any gaps in the education system that require addressing for the system to perform better, and it targets Grades 4 and 6.

4. The Assessment of Minimum Proficiency Level

The invitation by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) to have ECoL collaborate on the Assessment of Minimum Proficiency Level (AMPL) was welcomed with both arms. It was seen as an opportunity to generate vital data that would not only help the country report effectively on progress towards the attainment of SDG 4.1.1, but give a picture of how the Lesotho learners fair in comparison with their peers elsewhere in the world. It also came at the opportune time when the country is on the brink of embarking on a review of the basic education curriculum and making all efforts to recover the learning loss left behind by the Covid-19 pandemic in its wake. To both these initiatives, the assessment is hoped to produce data that will highlight areas requiring better emphasis.

5. Lesotho's experience with AMPL

The year 2023 was the year in which ECoL was to conduct the LNAEP survey, which was resuscitated in 2021 following a hiatus in 2018 due to financial constraints and again in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which left schools closed for a whole year. The initial plan was to conduct LNAEP and AMPL alongside each other, but this soon proved impossible due to conditions around LNAEP that required data collection thereof to be completed by the end of April, when preparations for AMPL were not yet finalised. Another factor that impeded this was the shortage of staff as the ECoL Research unit has a staff compliment of only three and the work involved was much more demanding than they could handle. Furthermore, the plan was to conduct both AMPLa and AMPLab. However, in consideration of the time remaining to conduct AMPL before the school winter break and other circumstances, this also proved unmanageable, hence AMPLa was dropped in favour of AMPLab at Grade 7.

6. Successes

The team appreciated all different forms of training they were exposed to by the ACER team, which provided much-needed guidance and familiarisation with the different stages of the study. The manuals and tools that were provided were all clear and detailed enough to provide all necessary information. Timely provision of related documents facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the study processes. The general support from both the UIS and ACER teams was commendable.

Locally, the team enjoyed great support and political will from the senior management of the Ministry of Education and Training, which helped to accelerate communication with school principals and eased some of the burden on the team. Despite the constrained time frame, schools' participation reached 100% across all districts, demonstrating strong commitment. Teachers displayed commendable levels of patience and cooperation, which contributed significantly to the study's success. Involving teachers with experience in similar studies as Test Administrators and School Coordinators proved advantageous both operationally and financially.

7. Challenges

Like with any other project, there were some challenges encountered during different phases of the study. To mention a few of these, budgeting was a rather arduous task due to limited conceptualisation of all required materials and their amounts. Additionally, staff shortages delayed the review and adaptation of instruments and manuals. Training workshops for Test Administrators, although valuable, extended for long hours due to information overload coupled with limited time to complete the whole exercise. Though schools generally cooperated, some delayed to share learners' lists, which, adversely affected packaging of instruments. Finally, since the data collection coincided with learners' mid-year examinations, affecting scheduling of tests.

8. Lessons learned

From experience with the AMPL study, several lessons have emerged that are vital towards enhancement of smooth conduct of future studies. One such lesson is that ample time should be allowed between data collection for any study and school closure time to avoid rushed and overloaded preparations. The back-to-back data collection sessions for two major studies stretched the small ECoL team beyond limits, hence it is clear that adequate time should be allowed between studies.

Moreover, piloting of instruments in a small number of schools is vital to shed some clarity on things like budgeting and better planning for all other related activities. Finally, it has become clear that in future studies, the team might benefit from engaging more hands from the beginning. These can either be officers from other departments and units within the organisation, if available or temporary staff.

9. Conclusion

The Examinations Council of Lesotho appreciates the opportunity it was afforded to participate in the AMPL project. The data that will be generated through this study will go a long way towards shedding light into the proficiency levels of learners in Lesotho primary schools. This will inform decision-making by different sections of the MoET on the course of action to take going forward in improving learning conditions for Basotho children and assist effective reporting on progress towards the attainment of SDG 4.1.1.