



**unesco**

Institute for Statistics

---

# A “Buyer’s Guide” for Student Learning Assessments

Kevin Macdonald

UIS Consultant

September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024

---

# Motivation – “Market” for Assessments

---

**A market in effect:** countries are buyers choosing among different student learning assessments (e.g.: PISA, TIMSS, etc.) offered by different sellers (OECD, IEA, etc.)

## **But an inefficient and inequitable market**

- **Limited competition:** product differentiation, proprietary instruments
- **Lack of transparency:** price discrimination, negotiation on fees, fees negotiated by third-parties (e.g.: development partners)
- **Barriers to new entrants:** establishing a new assessment program is costly and countries may not join / switch unless many other countries participate (critical mass, imbalance in power)
- **Lack of influence:** development partners have significant influence over many countries' assessment choice, major international assessments are the product of high income countries' institutions, power imbalance
- **Lack of country preparedness:** many countries are not prepared to participate in assessment to fully benefit (e.g.: lack of policy / approach on assessment choice, on how to benefit from capacity building, information about different assessments, procurement approaches, etc.)

# Motivation—results of the market

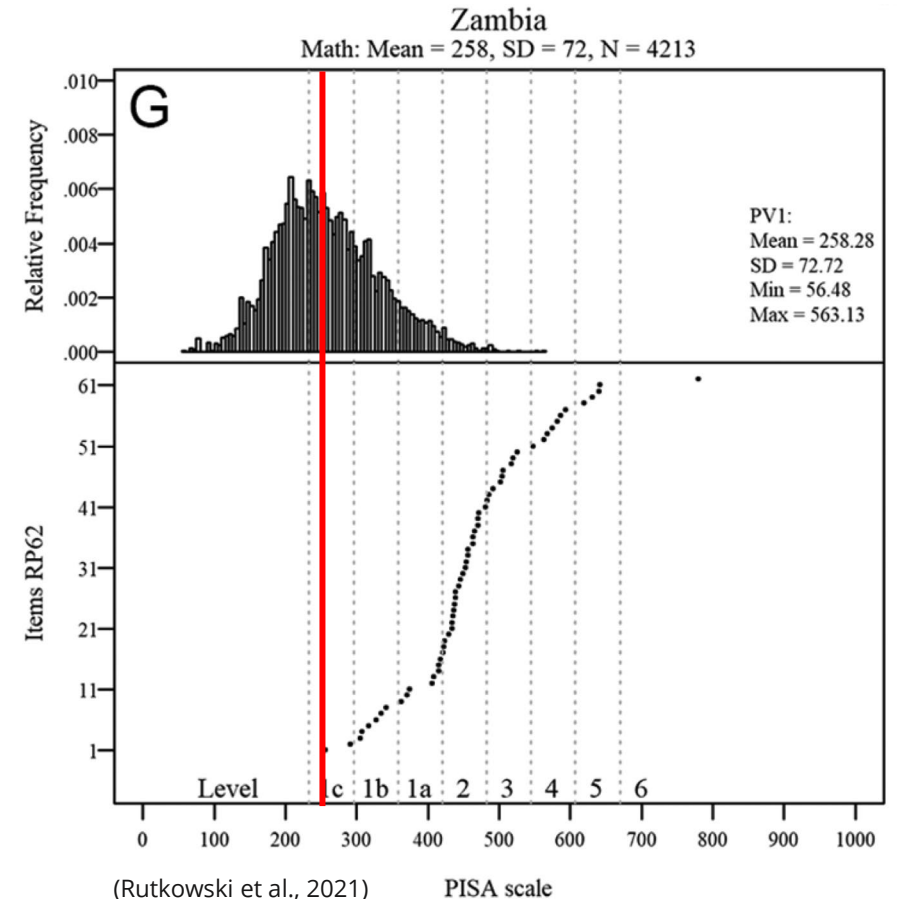
Many examples of

**Participation in assessments that are too difficult:** provides shock value (also embarrassment) but little information about how to improve learning

**Little to no institutional or capacity building:** expertise on assessment design, implementation, analysis not institutionalized (even after repeated rounds of assessment)

**Little use of assessment data after the fact:** countries have difficulty translating results into actions or using in planning and policy

\*Much of this can be traced back a lack of preparedness by countries themselves, i.e.: lack of strategy or policy towards assessment participation



# Objective of the Buyer's Guide

---

The purpose of the Buyer's Guide is to improve countries' preparedness to choose and benefit from learning assessments. The goal is to inform senior government policy makers of the following:

1. That there is **choice in student assessment**, each with pros and cons, and countries should think of themselves as the "buyer" in the market
2. That there are a few **technical differences that high level decision makers need to understand**, particularly related to policy relevance, sustainability and reputational risks (e.g.: embarrassment if the assessment is too difficult)
3. That **capacity building is a significant benefit** to participating in assessments but opportunities to build capacity sustainably differ by assessment provider
4. That assessments differ in **costs (beyond the fees charged by assessment providers)** and what these costs are
5. That the **choice should be made within the context of relevance to a country's educational needs and goals**, that is within the context of an assessment strategy or policy, even (perhaps especially) if relying on external donors

# Main content of the Buyer's Guide

---

**How do countries choose assessments in practice?** How much influence do different factors / actors have?

**Ten questions to ask yourself before “buying” a learning assessment:** what is needed to choose, prepare for and fully benefit from participating in an assessment

**Policy and institutional foundation:** the need for policy or strategy that links assessment decisions to a country's own educational needs and priorities, what would that policy or strategy look like?

**Learning assessment comparison chart:** how assessments differ in their specifications and in serving different purposes, to help countries choose which assessment is best suited for their needs

**Comparing (and documenting) costs:** Fees paid to assessment providers as well as costs (and resources more broadly) vary by assessment but are not well documented

**Comparing Capacity Building Activities:** Assessment programs provide capacity building opportunities to varying extents, but the preparedness of countries to benefit from sustainable capacity building also varies

**Buyer beware: what are some lessons? What are some pitfalls?** Generalized lessons of best practice and pitfalls drawing on the experience of countries, assessment providers and other partners

# Goals of participation in an assessment

---

- **Raise public awareness:** through the media and civil society to better understand education quality, accountability
- **Enable academic research:** promote better educational outcomes, policies, accountability, etc.
- **Compare to other countries:** to understand how competitive countries are
- **Measure progress across time:** to understand whether learning is improving or not
- **Benchmark:** to international or national norms (e.g.: proficiency levels, global MPL, national reference points)
- **Report on international commitments:** SDG 4.1.1 and other related indicators
- **Identify interventions to improve learning:** pedagogical decisions, informing PD, teaching resources, etc.
- **Evaluate:** specific interventions or investments or policy reforms,
- **Set national targets and plan:** to allocate national resources, make policy decisions
- **Revise national benchmarks and curricula:** based on international assessment frameworks
- **Build national capacity:** for assessment design, implementation and policy analysis (i.e.: facilitate above)
- **Ownership and pride:** ensure that assessments are culturally relevant and reflective of a region's values

# Core specifications to compare

---

Given a country's goals, then what are the key specifications that determine how well suited an assessment is to these goals? Here we want to focus on what senior policy makers really need to know

- **Ability level assessed:** how well does the ability level of the assessment overlap with ability distribution of the student population?
- **Actionable:** To what extent does the assessment identify what needs to be done to improve results?
- **Comparability:** How comparable are the results across countries, across time, how many countries, etc.?
- **Benchmarking:** What types of benchmarks can students be assessed on, e.g.: GMPL, program proficiency levels, national levels, domains (subjects), etc.
- **Capacity building provided:** How much design, implementation, and analysis is done by the supplier versus national experts? What training is provided?
- **Understandable results:** Does the assessment generate results that stakeholders (policy makers, teachers, parents, public) can easily interpret and understand? To what extent is socialization needed?
- **Ownership:** to what extent do participating countries have say in the design of the assessment?
- **Cost:** not just fees but all costs including human resource needs, etc.
- **Others?**

# Assessments to include

---

- **Global international assessments:** PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS
- **Regional international assessments:** ERCE, PILNA, SACMEQ, PASEC, SEA-PLM
- **Small scale but widely used assessments:** EGRA, EGMA
- **Assessments targeting developing countries:** PISA-D, LANA
- **Large scale school readiness assessments:** EDI, EHCI
- **Assessment modules that can be added to existing assessments or standalone:** AMPL
- **Population-based assessments:** MICS
- **Citizen-lead assessment:** UWEZO, PAL network, home-based evaluations
- **National assessments:** in general, not specific ones
- **National examinations?** Not assessments, but very well understood by the public!
- **Others?**



# Next steps

---

## Research

- **Better understanding of costs:** not just fees but all costs including human resource needs, collection of documents, cost data, interviews, etc.
- **Better understanding of how assessment choice is made in practice:** interviews with government, country experts, etc. – need volunteers!
- **Documenting good practice and missed opportunities:** a lot of good practice but also missed opportunities are known but not documented, promote learning from experience
- **Feedback / Review of our conclusions:** consultation with assessment providers, giving assessment providers a chance to respond / contest our claims.

## Questions for today:

- List of goals / specifications to compare / assessments: what to add? What to remove? Priorities?
- On diversity and inclusion: How to reach SEN students (often excluded from assessment programs)
- Who should we consult with for research activities above?

# Thank you

Learn more: [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org)



@UNESCOstat