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Capacity

Developing Sustainable Assessment Systems in Africa: South Africa

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WELL-DEVELOPED STRUCTURE ANCHORS SOUTH AFRICA'S ROBUST NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS



ASSESSMENT TEAM

- The **National Assessments Directorate** is housed within the **Chief Directorate for National Assessment and Public Examinations** at the Department of Basic Education.
- The National Assessments Directorate is led by a Director of National Assessments.
- The directorate is responsible for the design, implementation, and reporting of national, regional and international assessments for Grades R to 9.
- The unit comprises four **Chief Education Specialists (CES)**, each managing a sub-unit modeled on international assessment agencies (e.g IEA, OECD), including:
 - Test Development
 - Data Management
 - Administration
 - Research
- These sub-units are supported by statisticians and data administrators.



TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

- Technical advice is drawn from **independent researchers** and **international partners** such as ACER.
- No dedicated statutory research advisory body currently exists, but plans are underway to create a **Policy Advisory Unit** under ministerial oversight.



STEERING COMMITTEE

- Formal bilateral structures exist with **Umalusi**, the national quality assurance body, though their current role is limited primarily to matric-level exams.



COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK SPANNING CLASSROOM TO SYSTEM LEVEL

South Africa's assessment framework includes a structured mix of national, regional, and international assessments, enabling monitoring of learning outcomes and informing curriculum and policy reform.

NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS ^{1, 2, 3}	REGIONAL ASSESSMENTS	INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENTS
• SASE (<i>South African Systemic Evaluation</i>) - Replaces ANA; conducted every 3 years; assesses English and Mathematics in Grades 3, 6 and 9. • ELNA (<i>Early Learning National Assessment</i>) - Conducted every year; assesses Emerging Literacy and Numeracy in Grade 1.	• SEACMEQ (<i>Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality</i>) - Conducted every 4 to 5 years; assesses English and Mathematics in Grade 6.	• TIMSS (<i>Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study</i>) - Conducted every 4 years; assesses Mathematics and Science in Grades 5 and 9. • PIRLS (<i>Progress in International Reading Literacy Study</i>) - Conducted every 5 years; assesses Reading Literacy.

¹ GEC (*General Education Certificate*) - (pilot phase) conducted every year; assess students in Grade 9.

² MSAP (*Mental Starters Assessment Program*) - helps students with mental calculations at the foundational phase; conducted in partnership with Wits and Rhodes universities.

³ School-Based Assessments - continuous, summative assessments used for learner promotion; assess students from Grade R to 9.



*To shift the system... needs a mindset shift.
People are locked into 'I can only assess
through a traditional matric examination'...
but you need different forms of assessments
to test these new kinds of skills.*

INNOVATING AMID CONSTRAINTS - STRATEGIES FOR A FUTURE-FACING ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

While South Africa benefits from a relatively well-established assessment infrastructure, the system still faces implementation hurdles, skills gaps, and funding pressures. Strategic partnerships and internal reforms are helping to address these.



CHALLENGES

- Difficulty developing tools that capture evolving learning needs, especially 21st century skills like critical thinking.
- Teachers and advisors often untrained or hesitant to adopt new assessment forms.
- Persistent shortage of psychometricians and assessment specialists.
- University training pipelines remain weak or nonexistent for specialized roles.



POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

- Leverage political leadership for reform buy-in - engage senior as public champions for assessment innovation.
- Diversify funding approaches - use a mix of national treasury funds and targeted donor partnerships to ensure sustainability.
- Strengthen local expertise through higher education - encourage universities to offer specialized programs to address critical skills shortages.

Source	Description	Frequency	Duration	Participation
Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)	Training on item development and test frameworks	Once off	5 days	CES responsible for test development + panels appointed for Language and Mathematics
Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)	Training on sampling methodology	Once off	5 days	Director + Data Manager
International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)	Training on test administration of benchmark studies on learner achievement	Annual training through National Research Coordinators meetings linked to the administration of TIMSS and PIRLS	5 days	Director (National Research Coordinator (NRC)) + CES (Test administration)
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	Training on test administration of large-scale surveys	Annual training through National Project Managers meetings linked to the administration of TALIS	5 days	Director (National Research Coordinator (NRC)) + CES (Test administration)

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Us poor countries, like South Africa, have to pay out of our own pocket the full participation fees and administration costs, because we don't have a structure like that [of the European Commission] within the African Union.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING ASSESSMENT IMPACT

Recommendations for International Organizations:

Start Doing	Stop Doing
Support long-term, embedded partnerships across the full assessment cycle.	Stop assuming equivalent resource levels for assessments in the global north and south.
Help develop local expertise in psychometrics.	
Fund participation in international assessments through regional bodies.	

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ACER has been very good for us... There was always an emphasis on capacity building at every stage... but it's not a permanent relationship. When it ends, you're left on your own and have to build capacity again.