Assessment Practices Fit for a Fast-changing World: A South African Perspective

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Abstract: In the face of global uncertainties and pressing local inequalities, education systems worldwide are prioritising the development of competencies to equip learners with the skills necessary for the 21st century. In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has initiated a Curriculum Strengthening process that emphasises the integration of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies into teaching, learning, and assessment. This study addresses the central question: How can the assessment of competencies be integrated into national assessment policy and practice? Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study draws on a literature review, 15 semi-structured expert interviews, and primary research with 43 teachers and 118 learners across diverse school contexts. The thematic analysis of qualitative data is complemented by quantitative survey results to provide a comprehensive understanding of current assessment practices. Key findings highlight challenges such as over-reliance on summative assessments, resource constraints, and limited professional development for teachers. Nevertheless, opportunities exist in leveraging formative assessments and performance-based evaluations as key approaches to the assessment of competencies, as part of the broader national assessment regime. The study concludes that systemic changes are needed, including phased implementation, tailored teacher support, and flexible, context-appropriate assessment strategies. Recommendations emphasise aligning national assessment frameworks with the Basic Education Competency Framework (BECF), fostering inclusive and equitable classroom assessment practices, and supporting professional development to build teacher capacity.

Keywords: Competency assessment, 21st century skills, mixed-methods research, curriculum policy, teacher development.

1. Introduction

In a context of rapid global change, as well as pressing local challenges and inequalities, many education systems worldwide are focusing more deliberately on equipping learners with a broad range of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to enable them to thrive amidst increasing uncertainty. There is widespread global acknowledgment that education systems need to intentionally develop transversal skills and competencies in learners, which have been proven to equip them with the abilities they need to actively engage with and succeed in the workforce and in life more broadly. Countries worldwide have made strides toward incorporating competencies into their curricula. However, valid and reliable approaches to the assessment of competencies

are lagging due to the complexity of the domain and various capacity-related factors (Hoskins & Liu, 2019; USAID & UNICEF, 2024).

It is acknowledged that unless competencies are explicitly included in assessment, teaching, and learning practices, neither teacher nor learner mindsets and behaviours will change in the classroom (Schleicher, 2024; Human-Vogel, 2023). Global recognition of the importance of these competencies has resulted in considerable research and innovation on this topic in recent years (Hoskins & Liu, 2019). While several countries have made significant progress in competency-based policy and programming, many nations are still in the early stages of understanding what works in their context (USAID & UNICEF, 2024).

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has embarked on a national Curriculum Strengthening initiative to improve the quality and relevance of teaching, learning, and assessment in South African schools. This initiative includes a deliberate focus on integrating social, emotional, and cognitive competencies into the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment across the basic education system. Despite a well-articulated learner profile in Section 1 of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), there is broad acknowledgment that many learners exit the basic education system without the essential skills and knowledge they need to thrive in post-school life (NEDLAC, 2019; DHET, 2022). Local and international research shows that South African learners consistently struggle to master foundational skills, particularly tasks that demand deep conceptual knowledge and higher-order cognitive skills (Reddy et al., 2021). Research among South African job seekers and employers further reveals that school grades are weakly correlated with skills such as planning, concept formation, communication, numeracy, and grit (Carranza et al., 2022). This indicates that the current formal education system does not adequately prepare learners with the transferable skills they need to succeed in the post-school world.

To guide the Curriculum Strengthening initiative, a Basic Education Competency Framework (BECF) was developed during 2022–2023 through extensive research and consultation with over 1,000 education stakeholders across all nine provinces, as well as input from local and international experts. This framework prioritises and defines the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that all learners should have the opportunity to develop throughout their schooling (Hoskins & Liu, 2019). The BECF was adopted by the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) in November 2023 as a tool to guide Curriculum Strengthening efforts.
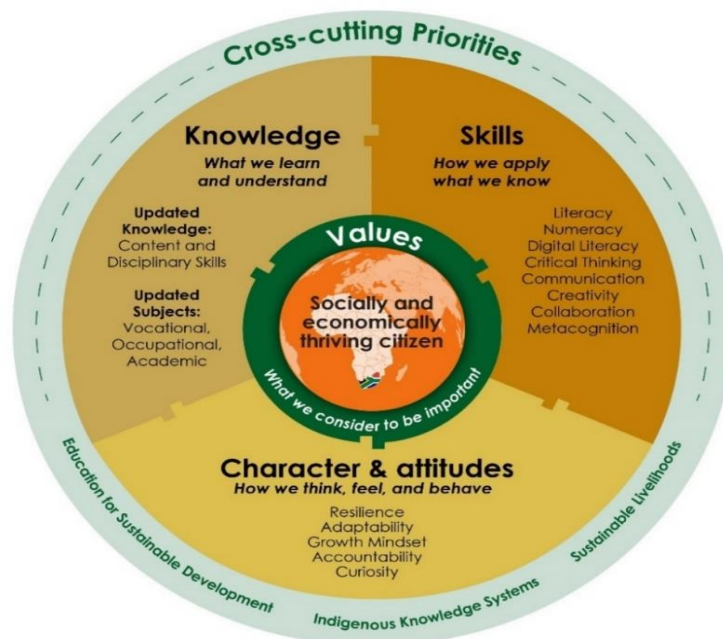
Figure 1: *The Basic Education Competency Framework. Reprinted from "Curriculum Strengthening Blueprint," by the Department of Basic Education, 2023.*

Over the past 30 years, South Africa's basic education system has developed robust mechanisms for measuring and reporting on learners' progress, particularly in relation to content knowledge. This includes the establishment of a reliable and efficient national examination system and school-based assessments (SBA). More recently, efforts have focused on improving the reliability of School-Based Assessments (SBA) and on introducing systemic evaluations to gauge the system's progress across phases. However, the system remains predominantly "assessment-focused and measurement-driven" (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013), emphasising summative assessments over formative practices and neglecting the assessment of competencies.

These challenges are compounded by contextual constraints such as resource limitations, large class sizes, a content-heavy curriculum, and insufficient teacher support (Kanjee et al., 2022). Research gathered from South African teachers indicates that they often experience significant difficulties in implementing effective assessment practices, which include a lack of training and professional development, especially in the assessment of competencies. Govender (2018) highlights that inadequate teacher support and professional development, particularly concerning the implementation of new approaches, stems from the assumption that teachers, being already qualified, possess the skills necessary to adopt new assessment strategies. Similarly, Sethusha (2013) found that many teachers lack foundational training in assessment during their initial teacher education, leaving them reliant on in-service workshops that often fail to provide the ongoing coaching and mentoring support required to implement these assessment practices effectively and meaningfully.

Class size further exacerbates the difficulty of implementing formative assessments, particularly in under-resourced schools where teachers face heavy administrative workloads (Mensah et al., 2023; Kanjee, 2009). Teachers in such contexts often resort to summative assessments or high-stakes testing, which limits opportunities for formative feedback and the development of competencies (Vandeyar & Killen, 2007). Additionally, infrastructure and resource limitations, such as inadequate school facilities and a lack of access to basic amenities like electricity and water, impede both teaching and assessment processes, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas (Mensah et al., 2023). These conditions create significant disparities in the quality of education and highlight the urgent need for flexible, context-sensitive approaches to the assessment of competencies.

To address these systemic challenges, effective policy development must consider teachers' experiences and provide ongoing professional development tailored to their needs. Furthermore, the diversity of the South African schooling system necessitates a flexible approach to assessment that accommodates learners from low socio-economic backgrounds and those in resource-constrained environments (Mensah et al., 2023). Without adequate teacher support and systemic adjustments, the shift towards the assessment of competencies risks being undermined by the very contextual factors it seeks to address.

1.1 Problem statement

Despite significant efforts to strengthen South Africa's basic education curriculum, the education system continues to fall short in equipping learners with the essential competencies required to thrive in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. While the Basic Education Competency Framework (BECF) provides a vision for integrating social, emotional, and cognitive competencies into teaching, learning, and assessment, the assessment landscape remains predominantly content-focused, summative, and measurement-driven. This mismatch undermines the development of transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, which are vital for learners' transitions into work, higher education, and entrepreneurial pathways.

Additionally, the contextual challenges mentioned above further hinder the adoption of formative assessment approaches. As a result, there is a critical need to explore how the assessment of competencies can be deliberately and effectively integrated into national policy and practice, ensuring that the system not only measures content learning outcomes but also fosters the broader competencies outlined in the BECF. Addressing this gap is essential to achieving the Department of Basic Education's goal of developing socially and economically thriving citizens.

1.2 Research question

This study seeks to explore the following primary research question:

Given the complexities of the South African basic education context, how can the assessment of competencies be integrated into national assessment policy and practice?

This question aims to address the growing need for a cohesive strategy to incorporate the assessment of competencies into South Africa's National Assessment Framework (NAF), leveraging best practices while tackling local challenges and priorities. The following sections outline the research's methodological approach, key findings, and their implications for education policymakers in South Africa.

2. Materials and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods, iterative, consultative approach to explore local and global practices in the assessment of competencies. Mixed-methods research (MMR) was chosen for its ability to enhance rigor, depth, and credibility by integrating qualitative and quantitative data (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Greene et al., 1989; Bryman, 2006). This approach ensured that findings were grounded in the South African context while being informed by global best practices. Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017) emphasise that MMR "expands and strengthens a study's conclusions" by providing both contextual richness and empirical evidence (p. 110). Greene et al. (1989) describe its value in addressing complementary aspects of a research question, which was critical in comprehensively examining the complexities of competency assessment in South Africa.

The study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, allowing qualitative and quantitative data to be collected and analysed simultaneously. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured expert interviews and task team engagements, provided detailed insights into stakeholder perspectives. Quantitative data, derived from surveys, South Africa's General Education Certificate (GEC) pilot, and Save the Children Teacher and Learner surveys, validated and expanded these findings.

A temporary task team of DBE officials, academics, education experts, and practitioners provided critique and expertise during three cross-functional workshops. This group gathered for three cross-functional workshops during the research process. A literature review synthesised global and local research on competency assessment, offering a foundational understanding of trends, challenges, and best practices.

Fifteen expert interviews were conducted with representatives from diverse sectors, including two government officials, five NGO representatives, three education practitioners, two development specialists, one academic, one assessment agency representative, and one education specialist. These interviews explored global and local perspectives on competency assessment practices. The interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed for accuracy, and the data were thematically analysed to identify key recommendations and group findings. To ensure confidentiality, interviewees were assigned anonymous labels (e.g., Expert 1).

Primary research with 43 teachers and 118 learners included focus group discussions with teachers, interactive learner workshops, and surveys across six schools in five provinces. Schools were selected to capture diverse contexts, including rural, urban, and disability-focused settings, with most located in lower socio-economic (quintiles 1–3) areas and one higher socio-economic (quintile 5) school in the Western Cape. Teachers and learners were convenience-sampled by schools and represented a range of subjects and phases (grades 8–11). Thematic analysis of qualitative data and descriptive statistics from surveys provided an understanding of current assessment practices and contextual realities.

3. Presentation of Results

This section presents the findings of the study, structured to align with the research objectives and informed by insights from the literature, expert interviews, and primary research conducted in South African schools. It begins by unpacking the complexities of assessing competencies, highlighting their unique characteristics and the factors that make their measurement challenging. The discussion then transitions to cover emerging insights into effective assessment practices and perspectives from competency experts, teachers and learners.

3.1 Insights and emerging learnings from the literature

A common theme emerging from this research is that there is no universally "optimal" form of assessment for competencies (Siarova, Sternadel, & Mašidlauskaitè, 2017), and that a combination of assessment forms is necessary. Hoskins and Liu (2019) and Care et al. (2020) provide insight into the multifaceted nature of competencies, which makes them complex to assess. They highlight the developmental and malleable nature of competencies; they evolve and improve over time with experience, practice, and reflection, emphasising the importance of continuous growth and learning. Scoular et al. (2020) and Piacentini et al. (2023) demonstrate a strong relationship between competencies and domain knowledge, indicating that competencies are most often developed through the teaching and learning of content knowledge and domain-specific skills. This means that the development of competencies should be embedded within the unique conventions and "ways of knowing" of each subject or domain, with the additional possibility of encouraging learners to establish connections between domains through interdisciplinary tasks. Care et al. (2020) discuss the multifaceted and interlinked nature of competencies, which comprise multiple sub-constructs and other contingent elements. They stress that while there is an underlying universality of the competencies included in frameworks like the BECF, competencies can be expressed and interpreted differently depending on cultural contexts and informed by local values. Hoskins and Liu (2019) summarise these notions well by stating that competencies "should not be considered as distinct and mutually exclusive – they overlap, interconnect, and reinforce one another to combine within the individual learner." Given these characteristics, it is crucial to utilise a combination of assessment methods to

effectively capture the multifaceted, developmental, interlinked, and malleable nature of competencies.

Piacentini et al. (2023) indicate that learners develop competencies by engaging in activities that are "realistic, complex, meaningful, and motivating" within a positive social environment. Many of these teaching and learning practices align with research insights from the learning sciences, which suggest that social interaction, a sense of purpose, learner agency, active engagement, iteration, and curiosity are important aspects of effective teaching and learning. Examples of these pedagogies include active learning strategies, such as project-based learning (PBL) (Sarma and Yoquinto, 2020). It is important for teachers to cultivate an environment conducive to this type of deeper learning to create the conditions under which learners can develop their competencies and be assessed.

The starting point for assessing competencies is aligning terminology and definitions (Human-Vogel et al., 2023; Hoskins & Liu, 2019; Care et al., 2020). Official competency terminology and its associated definitions at the policy level must extend into classroom resources, including rubrics, checklists, memos, and rating scales, so that they can be more routinely assessed.

When deciding which assessment forms and tools to use in a given context, several factors must be considered. The assessment of competencies can be integrated into national assessment frameworks at any level, ranging from formative and summative assessments of individual learners in the classroom to large-scale national, regional, and international assessments (Scoular et al., 2020). Assessment at each of these levels has various goals, affordances, and limitations, which should be considered to inform where to focus competency assessment innovation within a particular education system (Hoskins and Liu, 2019).

Different forms of assessment and their tasks lend themselves to specific competencies, depending on the nature of the competency and the goal of the assessment task (Suto and Eccles, 2014). Assessment forms well-suited to assessing competencies include performance assessments, surveys, and situational judgement tests (SJT) (Darling-Hammond and Adamson, 2010; Hoskins and Liu, 2019). Fadel et al. (2024) advocate for a mix of formative and performance-based assessments that emphasise real-world application and continuous growth. They underscore the need to move beyond rote memorisation and focus on developing and assessing skills that artificial intelligence (AI) cannot easily replicate. Performance assessment has emerged as an overarching category with the potential to assess a broad range of competencies, depending on the nature of the performance required (Darling-Hammond and Adamson, 2010). SJTs are designed to evaluate a person's judgement or decision-making in specific or real-world scenarios, where learners are presented with realistic or hypothetical situations related to the skills or attributes being measured. Hoskins and Liu (2019) suggest that SJTs are well-suited to measure competencies such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and ethical reasoning. Fadel et al. (2024) explore how AI tools can support

competency assessment by providing real-time feedback, personalised learning pathways, and scalable assessment methods. Further research is required in this area, as the capabilities of AI rapidly improve and offer considerable opportunities for innovation in teaching, learning, and assessment approaches.

Given the developmental nature of competencies, they cannot be effectively measured in one-off, moment-in-time assessments. An alternative approach is needed that tracks a learner's progress over time (Zitha, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Many competencies are supported by domain-specific content knowledge and should be assessed in the context of that content (Piacentini et al., 2023). Assessment tasks should be designed to reflect meaningful real-world challenges and scenarios that require learners to apply their skills in contexts similar to those they will encounter outside the classroom (Scoular et al., 2020). Some assessments of competencies evaluate not only the final outcome or product but also the processes learners use to achieve that outcome (Care et al., 2020). This includes planning, decision-making, collaboration, and reflection.

Learners should be allowed to demonstrate their understanding and skills through various formats, such as written reports, oral presentations, multimedia projects, performances, and portfolios (Care & Anderson, 2016). This approach supports Inclusive Education by accommodating diverse strengths (UNESCO, 1994). Opportunities should be provided for learners to analyse their own thinking, learning processes, and growth (Damşa & de Lange, 2019). Providing detailed, actionable feedback is a key component of effective assessments of competencies, as it guides further learning and development, helping learners to refine their skills and address specific challenges (Dehaene, 2020).

Although competency assessments come with their own challenges and limitations, they provide significant advantages by fostering a more holistic, practical, and personalised approach to education. This shift not only enhances students' academic growth but also equips them for success in both their personal and professional lives (Human-Vogel et al., 2023).

3.2 Expert Interviews

Experts highlighted the importance of designing inclusive and equitable assessments that accommodate the diverse needs of learners through contextualised, localised approaches (Expert 1, Expert 7, personal communication). They advocated for both systemic and classroom-level approaches, combining large-scale assessments to inform policy and strategy with formative assessments that provide ongoing feedback to learners (Expert 9, Expert 2, personal communication). Experts emphasised the potential of project-based learning (PBL) and performance-based assessments to evaluate competencies in realistic, practical contexts, fostering collaboration, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary application (Expert 3, personal communication). Additionally, the role of technology and AI in streamlining assessments, enabling real-time feedback, and supporting personalised learning pathways was underscored as

a significant opportunity for innovation (Expert 6, Expert 8, personal communication). Finally, experts called for collaboration with teachers to develop clear rubrics and guidelines to ensure transparency and consistency in competency evaluations and stressed the need for continuous professional development to empower teachers with the skills and confidence to implement these methods effectively (Expert 4, Expert 2, personal communication).

3.3 Teacher and learner perspectives

The following section presents the key findings from the primary research phase of this study, which explored the experiences and perceptions of teachers and learners regarding assessment practices in South African classrooms. These insights, gathered through focus group discussions, workshops, and surveys conducted with 43 teachers and 118 learners across diverse school contexts, provide a grounded understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the existing assessment landscape. By capturing the voices of those directly involved in the education process, this section sheds light on the practical realities of assessment implementation and offers a critical foundation for the broader discussion on integrating the assessment of competencies into national policy and practice.

3.3.1 Teacher Perspectives

Teachers identified assessment as a tool for preparation, evaluation, and reflection, but expressed concerns about the dominance of summative assessments, which prioritise compliance over meaningful learning. Informal assessments, while valued for real-time feedback, were seen as time-consuming and difficult to manage, particularly in resource-constrained classrooms with large class sizes and rigid curriculum demands. Teachers noted that assessments often remain theoretical and fail to prepare learners for real-world challenges, as many learners focus on memorising content for exams rather than engaging in genuine learning.

Language barriers further hindered assessment processes, with teachers spending significant time explaining complex terminology to learners whose home language differed from the medium of instruction. Teachers emphasised the need for more professional development, basic resources, and tailored support to implement effective and inclusive assessments, particularly for newly qualified teachers.

3.3.2 Learner Perspectives

Learners generally viewed assessments as opportunities for self-improvement, helping them identify strengths and weaknesses and prepare for future success. However, they criticised the heavy reliance on tests and exams, which they associated with rote memorisation and significant stress. Surveys revealed that 86% of learners identified tests and exams as the predominant form of assessment, followed by projects (39%) and individual assignments (33%). While some learners acknowledged the value of developing memorisation skills, most felt that tests and exams failed to promote genuine understanding or meaningful learning.

Many learners expressed a preference for more diverse, hands-on assessments, such as projects, oral presentations, and group work, which they believed better aligned with their interests and aspirations. These formats were seen as more effective for developing critical skills such as collaboration, public speaking, and problem-solving. Learners also emphasised the importance of receiving regular, actionable feedback, though they noted that this was inconsistent across classrooms. Interestingly, learners from the quintile 5 school in the Western Cape, representing the highest socio-economic category, reported experiences similar to those of peers in quintile 1–3 schools. This finding, while based on a limited sample, suggests that systemic issues within assessment policy may play a greater role than resource disparities in shaping learners' experiences.

Overall, the teacher and learner data highlight the need for diverse assessment methods and pedagogical approaches that accommodate varied learning styles, enhanced classroom management training for teachers, more deliberate addressing of language barriers, and the integration of both theoretical and practical components in assessments to improve learning outcomes for all students.

4. Discussion of Findings

This study sought to answer the primary research question: Given the complexities of the South African basic education context, how can the assessment of competencies be integrated into national assessment policy and practice? The findings revealed insights into current assessment practices, barriers, and opportunities for embedding the assessment of competencies in South Africa's basic education system.

The findings indicate a gap between the aspirations of the Basic Education Competency Framework (BECF) and the realities of current assessment approaches. Teachers and learners identified challenges, including the predominance of rote, summative assessments, a burdensome assessment load, insufficient training for teachers, and limited resources. However, both groups recognised the value of integrating competencies to foster critical thinking, creativity, and real-world application.

Global studies underscore the importance of aligning assessment practices with domain knowledge and contextual realities (Care et al., 2020; Piacentini et al., 2023). This study reaffirms these findings, as teachers emphasised the need for tools that integrate competencies into their subject areas while accommodating the developmental and cultural nuances of their learners.

Both teachers and learners included in the primary research reiterated the value of informal assessment in enabling learning; however, it was recognised that these assessments are often time-consuming, adding to the already heavy workload experienced by teachers and learners. Both teachers and learners shared the concern that formal assessments, such as exams, often test the ability to memorise rather than to understand and apply knowledge. For local teachers,

the burden of assessment extended to the administrative and logistical demands placed on them, raising concerns about how to effectively implement innovative and updated forms of assessment required to assess competencies effectively (Bhabha et al., 2024).

While much of the international literature highlights the potential of technology and interdisciplinary approaches for competency assessment, South African teachers and learners prioritised simpler, contextually appropriate strategies, such as enhanced school-based or formative assessments and practical tools for classroom use. This divergence likely reflects resource constraints and large class sizes unique to the South African context. The focus on immediate, low-tech solutions contrasts with the tech-heavy strategies employed in more resourced education systems, highlighting the need for locally tailored approaches.

Another notable discrepancy involves professional development. International best practices often emphasise extensive teacher training programmes (OECD, 2023); yet South African participants advocated for scalable, ongoing support embedded in their daily work. This suggests the need for adaptive, on-the-job learning models that account for the high workload of teachers in resource-constrained environments.

Overall, the findings reveal the need to increase the diversity of assessment types to enable the effective development and measurement of competencies in learners while actively addressing issues of teacher and learner workload, as well as pedagogical and assessment practices well suited for large class sizes and phased teacher capacity building.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings underscore the importance of creating a coherent, phased strategy for the assessment of competencies in South Africa. This includes:

- **Aligning policy and practice**: Developing a unified language and framework for competencies to ensure consistency across curriculum, assessment, teacher development and teaching and learning materials.
- **Building teacher capacity over time**: Providing ongoing, context-specific professional development to enhance teachers' confidence and skills in assessing competencies.
- **Rebalancing assessment approaches:** Transitioning from rote memorisation toward performance-based and process-oriented assessments, which better reflect real-world skills.
- **Leveraging existing initiatives**: Expanding initiatives like the GEC and AfL initiatives to explicitly incorporate competencies.

These findings provide inputs for integrating the assessment of competencies into South Africa's basic education system, balancing emerging best practices with the unique challenges and opportunities of the local context. Further research and iterative implementation will be critical to refining these approaches and achieving systemic change.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study provides emerging insights into how the assessment of competencies can be integrated into local assessment approaches to address gaps in learner outcomes and prepare students for a rapidly changing world. The findings reveal a misalignment between the aspirations of the Basic Education Competency Framework (BECF) and current assessment practices, which remain heavily focused on summative approaches that emphasise rote memorisation over critical thinking and real-world application.

Significant barriers, such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and overcrowded classrooms, hinder the adoption of innovative assessment practices. Nevertheless, the study identifies encouraging opportunities, including teachers' readiness to integrate competencies into teaching and learning, learners' enthusiasm for developing their skills, and the potential to build on existing initiatives like the General Education Certificate (GEC) and Assessment for Learning (AfL) to foster meaningful change.

The research underscores the importance of creating a coherent, phased approach to integrating competency assessments, tailored to South Africa's unique contextual realities. It calls for aligning curriculum, assessment, teacher development, and other strategic levers to ensure consistency and impact.

Based on the study's findings, the following considerations are proposed to guide the DBE's integration of the assessment of competencies into South Africa's education system:

- **Policy Alignment**
  a. Define clear goals and priorities for assessing competencies within the National Assessment Framework (NAF), ensuring alignment with national education objectives.
  b. Revise and enhance the NAF to integrate the competencies outlined in the Basic Education Competency Framework (BECF).
  c. Establish a standardised and updated assessment framework and terminology that explicitly embeds competencies into the national assessment structure, fostering consistency and coherence across policy and implementation processes.

- **Phased Implementation**
  d. Begin with a targeted rollout of one or two key competencies to build capacity, gather insights, and refine implementation strategies.
  e. Gradually increase the emphasis on school-based, formative assessments (SBA) while reducing the dominance of high-stakes examinations.
  f. Refine and address challenges emerging from existing pilots offering cross-curricular and interdisciplinary assessments to evaluate their practicality and effectiveness.
  g. Prioritise performance-based and process-oriented assessments that promote real-world application and critical thinking.

h. Introduce learner self-assessment tools to foster metacognitive skills, enhance learner agency, and alleviate the workload on teachers.

i. Provide targeted support for resource-constrained schools to strengthen educator capacity that address contextual challenges, ensuring teachers are equipped to effectively assess competencies within their unique environments.

j. Allow schools and educators to opt into competency assessment initiatives voluntarily, fostering autonomy and encouraging innovative practices with appropriate support mechanisms.

- **Teacher Development and Support**

    k. Align initial teacher education and continuous professional development programmes with the objectives of the BECF.

    l. Establish ongoing professional development programmes, including accredited online courses, to build educators' capacity in assessment literacy and pedagogical strategies that intentionally foster competencies and integrate them into daily teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

    m. Collaborate with local educators to develop a centralised repository of assessment tools, resources, and best practices, designed to support teachers in assessing competencies, particularly during the initial stages of adoption.

- **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Communication**

    n. Develop and implement robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the rollout of competency assessments to identify challenges, measure progress, and inform ongoing improvements.

    o. Design and execute a comprehensive communication and advocacy strategy to engage key stakeholders—teachers, learners, parents, and policymakers—on the importance, objectives, and benefits of assessing competencies as part of the broader assessment regime.

Integrating competency assessments into South Africa's education system represents a significant step towards fostering holistic learner development. While challenges remain, the insights and recommendations provided in this study offer practical policy and implementation considerations for deliberation and further expansion by curriculum, assessment, and teacher development colleagues within the DBE. By leveraging existing initiatives, prioritising teacher support, and adopting a phased approach, South Africa can create an education system that equips learners with the skills they need to thrive in an uncertain and rapidly evolving world.

7. Future Research

Further research is required to deepen understanding of effective strategies for integrating competencies into national assessment policy and practice. Key areas of inquiry include:

- Explore cost-effective models for teacher professional development.
- Evaluate the long-term impact of competency assessments on learner outcomes.
- Investigate the scalability of successful pilot programmes across diverse contexts.

- Exploring the affordances and limitations of AI in assessment.

8. Declarations

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List of abbreviations

- AfL – Assessment for Learning
- AI – Artificial Intelligence
- CAPS – Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
- CEM – Council of Education Ministers
- DBE - Department of Basic Education
- BECF - Basic Education Competency Framework
- MMR – Mixed Methods Research
- MTBBE - Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education
- NAF - National Assessment Framework
- PBL – Project-Based Learning
- SBA – School-based Assessment
- SCSA- Save the Children South Africa
- SJT – Situational Judgement Tests
- UNICEF – United Nationals International Children's Emergency Fund
- UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
- USAID - United States Agency for International Development