

Gains and losses in new O-level curriculum

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The old curriculum was objective based with emphasis on knowledge acquisition with the teacher at the centre of the teaching and learning process while the new curriculum is competence based, with the learner at the centre of learning. FILE PHOTO

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By PAUL MURUNGI

Is the new O-level curriculum a magic bullet to the gaps that have been continuously pointed out in Uganda's education system? Well, just as a cook's culinary skills are tested and judged at the dinner table, the answer to this question can only be answered if the new curriculum sees the light of day.

Just last week, Parliament voted to halt the rolling out of the new curriculum citing inconsistencies in its implementation plan.

After years of back and forth, consultations and research on matching skills and learning outcomes, the Ministry of Education wants to roll out the new O-Level curriculum to schools at the beginning of the term; with the current Primary Seven leavers being the pioneers.

The curriculum has been described in glowing terms by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) review as a curriculum aimed at reducing content overload and contact hours in the classroom so as to create time for research and project work, talent development and creativity; allowing for emerging fields of knowledge across all subjects and doing away with obsolete information.

Comparison

According to Grace Baguma, the director at the NCDC, the old curriculum was objective based with emphasis on knowledge acquisition with the teacher at the centre of the teaching and learning process while the new curriculum is competence based, with the learner at the centre of learning.

“The new curriculum focuses on learning outcomes and aims at producing a holistic learner equipped with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required for the 21st Century.

Baguma points out the generic skills emphasised as being critical thinking and problem solving, co-operation and self-directed learning, creativity and innovation, mathematical computations and ICT proficiency and communication.

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According to the subject menu, the old curriculum, currently has 43 subjects and will continue from Senior Two to Four until it is phased out. The new curriculum on the other hand has 21 subjects only. For S1 and S2, the compulsory subjects include: English, Mathematics, History and Political Education, Geography, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, General Science, Physical Education, Religious Education, Entrepreneurship and Kiswahili.

While the elective or optional subjects include: Agriculture, Information Communication Technology, Foreign Languages (French, German, Latin, Arabic, Chinese), Local languages, Literature in English, Art and Design, Performing Arts, Technology and Design, Nutrition and Food Technology. Here students will be required to choose one subject as optional.

For S3 and S4, the compulsory subjects include: English, Mathematics, History & Political Education, Geography, Physics, General Science, Biology and Chemistry while the practical (pre-vocational) electives/ optional subjects will include: Agriculture, Entrepreneurship, Art and Design, Information Communication Technology, Nutrition and Food Technology, Performing Arts, Physical Education.

Christopher Muganga, the head of Curricular Development for secondary schools at NCDC says a school will have 15 subjects on its menu but will offer 12 subjects at Senior One and Two, of which 11 are compulsory while one will be optional. At Senior Three and Four, students will be expected to exit with a minimum of eight and a maximum of nine subjects with seven compulsory subjects.

Chinese language has been added to the menu of foreign languages while Kiswahili, Physical Education and entrepreneurship are compulsory subjects at Senior One and Two.

Baguma says the curriculum has also paid attention to learners with special needs. Such students who are unable to study science subjects will offer General Science. Meanwhile, a sign language syllabus has also been developed as an alternative language.

Vocational studies

Interested learners in skills-based subjects will be subjected to the Directorate of Industrial Training examinations. The subjects include: Nutrition and Food Technology, Entrepreneurship, Agriculture, ICT, Technology and Design, Performing Arts, Art and Design and Physical Education.

Successful students will be awarded with a competence certification of level 1 on the Uganda Vocational Qualification Framework (UVQF). This certification will help learners to progress to the next levels of education.

Classroom time

Baguma says classroom teaching will reduce to five hours a day. Lessons start at 8:30 am and end at 2:50pm. She says this is to allow learners engage in research, project work, clubs, games and sports. She as well notes that the one hour and 40 minutes is to allow students have time for self-reflection on what has been taught with school day ending at 4:30 pm.

Previously, in the old curriculum, students studied from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm daily.

sometimes with an extension of an hour especially for candidate classes and this depended on school policy.

Assessment

Baguma says the current teaching and assessment are examination driven focusing on acquiring a high grade pass as opposed to reasoning, critical analysis, understanding and acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Baguma says in the new curriculum, the formative assessment scores will form part of the total learner score at the end of the cycle. These have been agreed at 20 per cent for formative or school-based assessment and 80 per cent for the summative or end of cycle assessment.

She says in the formative assessment, the teachers will be expected to observe the learner for any signs of the acquired values, skills and change in attitude and take record of this in addition to assessing knowledge and understanding the skills.

All this will be reflected at the compilation of the total formative assessment scores. The marks will be captured throughout the four years averaged and computed. Thereafter, the results will be submitted to Uganda National Examination Board for the overall grading of the learner.

Muganga explains why the 20 per cent is important. “Uneb will assess 80 per cent and what a student has been doing will be computed to make a 20 per cent. We don’t want a learner to lose what they have covered in a year. We can’t use a two-hour exam to determine the fate of the learner.”

Scrapped subjects

Some of the pre-vocational subjects scrapped and reintegrated include: Music, Health Education, Clothing, Textiles, Homes Management, Wood work, Technical Drawing, Metalwork, Building Construction, Electricity and Electronics, Power and Energy, Commerce, Computer Studies, Shorthand, Typewriting, Office Practice and Art and Design.

These have been broadly reintegrated into new subjects such as: Agriculture, Information Communication Technology, Art and Design, Performing Arts, Technology and Design, Nutrition and Food Technology.

Muganga says the teachers whose subjects have been reintegrated will continue to teach the same subjects in other classes since they still have more as they get retooled to do new subjects.

He adds that it's the school board of governors, Parent Teacher Associations to agree on which optional subjects (electives) to choose according to what they can afford as long they can take a minimum of 15 subjects.

What teachers say

Peter Okello, a teacher at Sir Samuel Baker Secondary School in Gulu District, makes an analysis of the curriculum changes.

“I have seen the changes, especially in my subject area of sciences. It addresses what has been lacking when it comes to practicals,” he says.

Okello adds that the application of the subject to the students outside class used to be so minimal for the old curriculum.

“In the past, we have only been looking at results and the assessment was result oriented. It wasn’t about what a child can do, but what they have scored in the paper in terms of report cards. Passing in fourth grade doesn’t necessarily mean that a learner is dull, it could simply mean that they have more potential in other areas of interest,” he remarks.

Sam Kyosingwire, a teacher at Kira College Butiiki in Jinja District appreciates the fact that vocational work has been integrated into the new curriculum.

“Students will have time for a hands-on experiences instead of being immersed solely in theory. With this kind of learning, a learner can get to be absorbed into the job market after O-Level,” he says.