

Inclusive Assessment in Tanzania: A Myth or Reality?

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ABSTRACT

The National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) was established in 1973, following the withdrawal of Tanzania from the East African Examinations Council in 1971. Since then, NECTA has been coordinating and managing national examinations at primary and secondary school levels. It also coordinates and manages teacher college examinations. With such a huge pool of customers, NECTA has been serving learners with diverse learning needs, including learners with disabilities. This requires NECTA to find ways to accommodate those learners. This paper discusses inclusive assessment, an approach to assessment which ensures that assessment policies, procedures, and practices support and enhance the inclusion of all learners, including those with special needs. The paper intends to establish whether inclusive assessment in the Tanzanian context is a myth or a reality. This qualitative study mainly collected data through documentary reviews and individual interviews. The findings suggest mixed feelings; in some areas, NECTA performs well. However, there are a lot of gaps to be filled by the government, NECTA and other stakeholders to ensure inclusive assessment is implemented to the fullest.

Keywords: Assessment, inclusive assessment, learners with disabilities, NECTA

INTRODUCTION

The National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) is a Government Institution established by the Parliamentary Act No. 21 of 1973. NECTA is responsible for the administration of all National Examinations and Assessments in Tanzania. It was established in December 1973 after the government's pull-out from the East African Examinations Council in 1971. At its initial stage, NECTA had a mission "to contribute to national development through fair, efficient and effective national examinations and education assessment systems that provided high-quality stakeholder services through competent and motivated staff." Its vision was "to be the centre of excellence within and beyond Tanzania in Quality Educational Measurement and Assessment" (The National Examinations Council of Tanzania, 2004). With the change in social and technological needs, the Mission and Vision of NECTA have been changed to accommodate the current needs. Currently, NECTA has a Mission "to be the Centre of Excellence in Quality Education Assessment and Certification" and its Vision is "to Provide Fair, Efficient and Effective Educational Assessment"

NECTA has six functions. They include formulating examinations policy, assuming responsibility for examinations within the United Republic of Tanzania, receiving from other persons or bodies of person's reports or other material affecting examinations policy, and cooperating with other persons or bodies of persons in the development of an examination system in the United Republic of Tanzania. Others are to conduct examinations for, and to grant, diplomas, certificates, and other awards of the council and to facilitate, administer, and supervise foreign examinations in Tanzania (see www.necta.go.tz). This paper was presented at the conference to celebrate the 50 years (1973 to 2023) anniversary of NECTA's establishment. It is expected here that the presented papers, including this one, will help the NECTA to reflect on the extent to which its mission and vision have been achieved. In this conference, the following sub-themes were discussed:

- (a) The role of assessment feedback in teaching and learning.
- (b) Assessment for learners with disabilities.

- (c) Competence-based assessment in the 21st century.
- (d) Assessment for life-long learning.
- (e) The role of assessment in enhancing competency-based learning.
- (f) The role of ICT in assessment.

The current paper delved into inclusive assessment (Assessment for learners with disabilities). The paper highlights whether inclusive assessment is a myth or a reality.

Methodology

The objective of this study was to establish whether inclusive assessment in the Tanzanian context is a myth or a reality. This qualitative study mainly collected data through documentary reviews and individual interviews. Qualitative studies do not concentrate on the use of specific sample sizes or cases for representation purposes; it is the specific needs of the study that determine the types of participants and sample size of the study, which is usually small (Msoroka, 2021). The researcher of the current study decided on suitable cases/participants who were resourceful enough to provide relevant information (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, this study did not pick a specific number of documents to review and a specific number of interviewees. Instead, the researcher collected relevant documents and reviewed them thoroughly. Consequently, the documents related to assessment, inclusive assessment, examination reports, and policies related to assessment were also reviewed. The search yielded 25 records. To maintain focus, the author had to develop the inclusion criteria which helped to gauge relevant documents (Moher et al., 2010). Table 1 indicates the inclusion and exclusion criteria employed in this study.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1. International documents related to assessment.	Documents related to education but with no connection with assessment
2. Documents related to assessment in Tanzania between 1973 and 2023.	Documents related to assessment connected with Tanzania, but prior 1973
2. Documents related to inclusive assessment	Documents that are not connected with inclusive assessment.
3. National examination reports for people with special needs.	National examination reports for other candidates.
4. National policies related to assessment.	National policies that are not related with assessment.

The author developed a checklist to guarantee accessibility of relevant information. Other necessary information thought to have contributed to this study was also recorded. Eventually, a total of 13 documents were reviewed. Figure 1 below (PRISMA 2020 flow diagram) summarises the review process.

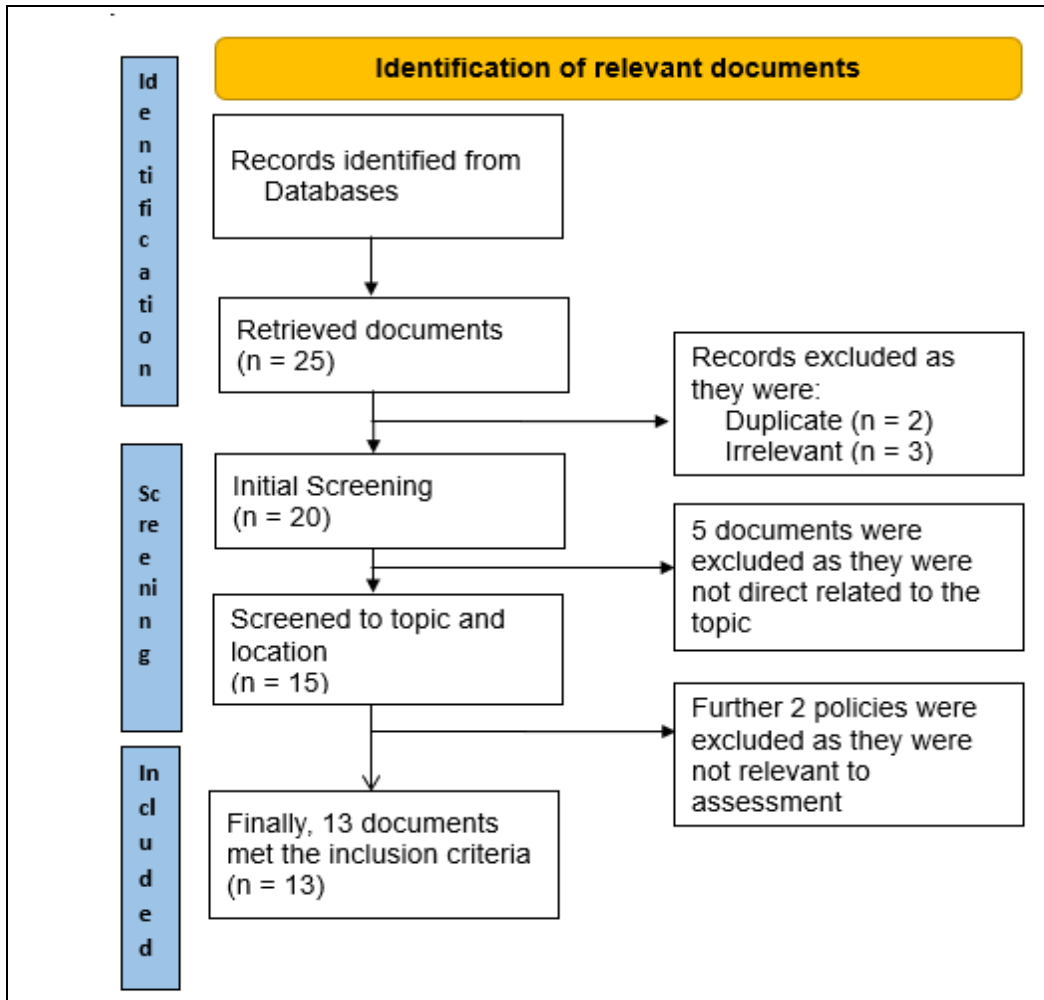


Figure 1: Flow diagram for the systematic review following the PRISMA statement

Source: Adapted from Page MJ, et al. (2021)

Similarly, three (3) resourceful officials from NECTA were interviewed. The data provided a significant contribution to the development of this paper. The data analysis engaged the researcher in writing the transcripts from interviews and documentary analysis. Moreover, the author conducted multiple readings of the raw data from interviews and documentary analysis. The multiple readings were intentionally conducted in order to examine and interpret the texts critically. The analysis process was guided by objectives of the study to allow the researcher to “maintain a critical lens when re-reading and analysing

data related to research phenomena” (Kamenarac, 2019, p. 108). As a consequence, themes and subthemes formed headings and subheadings of this paper emerged from the text organically (Creswell, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 1993; Msoroka, 2021).

Findings

Assessment

In the education context, assessment is associated with a series of measures used to understand the learning attributes of an individual or group of individuals. This involves gathering and interpreting information about learning goals and student's levels of attainments. The teacher/facilitator assesses the learning processes through both observation and measurement to understand students' learning in the subject/course. This includes collecting graded and non-graded evidence about students' progress in respective subjects/courses (Tontus, 2020; Watson, n.d; Yambi, 2018). Assessment is categorised into formative and summative assessments.

Formative Assessments/Assessment for Learning

This refers to tasks/activities that provide feedback for students about their learning in the subject (Watson, n.d). This is usually referred to as “assessment for learning.” Sometimes formative assessments do not contribute to the grade in a course (Nordengren, 2021). The focus of formative assessment is on student learning. The formative assessment activities usually give students a chance to check their understanding of the subject matter. Students can use the feedback provided to improve their learning through reflection. The feedback can include written/verbal comments, quiz/question scores and others (Watson, n.d). Commonly, formative assessment enables teachers and students to answer three key questions:

1. What has been learnt?
2. How is learning progressing?
3. What will be learned next?

Formative assessment provides:

1. Feedback to the teacher about how and where to modify the teaching of the programme to meet the needs of one or more of their students;
2. Feedback on what achievement of standards looks like;
3. Diagnostic feedback is incorporated into the design of a learning programme with learning outcomes in mind (The Education State, n.d, p. 2).

As indicated above, the formative assessment is sometimes referred to as “Assessment for Learning” as it provides an opportunity for both a student and a teacher to improve the teaching and learning processes. The main feature of “Assessment for Learning” is effective feedback provided by a teacher to a learner on his/her progress (Jones, 2005). Therefore, based on the argument above, it is argued here that formative assessment cannot be ignored as it has a major impact on students’ learning. Basically, formative assessment is the core objective of teaching.

What does NECTA do in Formative Assessment?

As argued earlier, formative assessment/assessment for learning has a major contribution to student learning. Thus, it is important to weigh it accordingly and make teachers more seriously during teaching and learning processes. This approach is in-line with the 1974 Musoma Directive on the Implementation of Education for Self- reliance, which stated that:

The excessive emphasis now placed on written examinations must be reduced, and the student’s progress in the classroom plus his/her performance of other functions and the work which he will do as part of his education, must all be continually assessed and the combined result is what should constitute his/her success or failure (The National Examinations Council of Tanzania, 2004, p. 45)

It is from this perspective that NECTA's assessment package became 50% for school-based assessment and the other 50% meant for final examinations. Currently, NECTA's assessment package constitutes 30% for school-based assessment and 70% for final examinations. This means that formative assessment contributes 30% of students' final grade, while summative assessment counts 70% of the final grade.

Summative Assessment/Assessment of Learning

Summative assessment is often referred to as "assessment of learning." It refers to any task/activity that results in a score/grade which judges the final student's performance (Watson, n.d). Summative assessments are meant for promotion of students from one level to another or determining whether they have met the required standards for certification. What makes an assessment "summative" is not the design of the test items or assignment, but rather the way it is used. In the context of Tanzanian schools, summative assessments are the final examinations coordinated by NECTA. They are provided at the end of the school cycle to measure how well the learners have attained the learning objectives. NECTA plays a great role in summative assessment. NECTA sets examinations and moderate examination items, organises and coordinates distribution of examination papers, marking arrangements and dissemination of the results. Therefore, the whole processes for summative assessment constitutes 70% of the final grades of students who sit for NECTA examinations.

Why Assessment of Students?

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning processes. As we assess, we evaluate whether the educational objectives/goals and standards of the subjects are attained. Assessment directs students and instructors' attention on what is important (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). It is also impliedly that "it is only when faced with assessments that students truly engage with the course materials" (Watson, n.d, p. 2). Assessment affects decisions about instructional needs, grades, curriculum, placement, advancement, and in some cases, funding. Assessment inspires us to ask the following hard questions: "Are we teaching what we think we are teaching?" "Are students learning what

they are supposed to be learning?" "Is there a different way to teach the subject very well for promotion of better learning?"

Inclusive Assessment

Educational institutions, including Tanzanian schools, comprised multiple learners with different learning needs. It is for this reason, inclusive education is the cornerstone amongst education initiatives in recent years. Inclusive education refers to an approach to accommodate all learners (despite their learning needs) in mainstream education by addressing learners' diverse learning needs. Inclusive education involves adaptation and adjustment of curriculum content, pedagogy/andragogy, teaching and learning materials, learning environment, and assessment to ensure access and participation of all learners (UN, n.d). Inclusive assessment is an approach to assessment in mainstream settings where policy and practice are designed to promote learning of individual learners. The purpose of inclusive assessment is to ensure that all assessment policies, procedures, and practices support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all learners, including those with special needs. It aims at preventing segregation by avoiding all forms of labelling and promoting inclusion. It is argued here that inclusive assessment practices should lead to the general assessment approaches.

Principles of Inclusive Assessment

Scholars such as (Thurlow et al., 2016, pp. 4-22) have identified six core principles of inclusive assessment. These principles are:

Principle Number 1: All students with disabilities must be included in the assessment system

- With this principle, all learners who attend education need to be included in the assessment system.
- Alternative assessments are allowed as long as they are allowed for other students. This is allowed only after the methods are carefully reviewed by stakeholders and policymakers; their use and impact should be carefully studied before their implementation.

- Exemptions/exclusions from assessment are allowed for students with disabilities with the same conditions that are allowed for other students.

Principle Number 2: Decisions about how students with disabilities participate in the assessment system are the result of clearly articulated participation, accommodations, and alternate assessment decision-making processes.

- Decisions about how students participate in the assessment system are based on their ability to show what they know and are able to do in the assessment formats available to all students.
- The National Examination team makes assessment participation, accommodation, and alternate assessment decisions on an individual student basis.

Principle Number 3: All students with disabilities are included when student scores are publicly reported, in the same frequency and format as all other students, whether they participate with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment.

- All students who receive educational services are accounted for in the reporting system.
- Students who are not in the assessment system are reported and an explanation is given for their non-participation.
- Reports are provided to policymakers, parents, educators, students, and journalists with a clear explanation of results and implications.

Principle Number 4: The assessment performance of students with disabilities has the same impact on the final accountability index as the performance of other students, regardless of how the students participate in the assessment system (i.e., with or without accommodations, or in an alternate assessment).

- Performance data for all students, regardless of how they participate, have a similar impact as all other student performance data in accountability indices.

Principle Number 5: There is improvement of both the assessment system and the accountability system over time, through the processes of formal monitoring, ongoing evaluation, and systematic training in the context of emerging research and best practices.

- All decisions about student participation, alternate assessment, and accommodations are collected, compiled, and reported. The data are used to improve the quality of the assessment process.
- The consequences of student assessment decisions are identified, compiled, and reported. These data are reviewed by multiple stakeholders and used to improve the quality of the accountability processes at the school, district, regional and national levels.

Principle Number 6: Every policy and practice reflect the belief that all students must be included in the assessment and accountability systems.

- There should be broad support from the government and amongst professional groups for the inclusion of all students in the efforts linked to assessments. This should be demonstrated by sufficient funding and resources to improve the capacity of all schools for every student to succeed.
- All students need to be included in every aspect of assessment and accountability systems, including assessments, determination of accountability measures, data reporting, and data use for school improvement.
- All aspects of assessment and accountability systems are designed and reviewed collaboratively, with inputs from other stakeholders (e.g., related service providers, parents, community members, advocacy groups and others).

What is the Current Status of NECTA to Accommodate Inclusive Assessment?

NECTA has been accommodating learners with disabilities in the same way like schools. NECTA has served five types of learners with disabilities. These learners include:

1. Learners with a Total Blind (TB).
2. Learners with Low Vision (LV).
3. Learners with Hearing Impairment (HI).
4. Learners with Intellectual Impairment (II).
5. Learners with Physical Impairment (PI).

All these groups of learners have been sitting for national examinations coordinated by NECTA from primary school level, secondary school level, and teacher professional examinations. The current practice requires NECTA to identify learners with special needs ahead of any examination session. The earlier identification enables NECTA to find proper mechanisms to assist these learners based on their needs. For instance, NECTA ensures that learners with *Total Blindness (TB)* are served with Braille question papers. This helps the Total Blind learners to attempt their examinations easily and eventually inclusive assessment is realised. For learners with *Low Vision (LV)*, NECTA prepares special examination papers with enlarged font sizes to allow them to read the test items easily. Learners with *Hearing Impairment (HI)* are served with the normal examination papers.

However, their papers are marked with sign language experts since dropping conjunctions are sometimes used when responding to questions. Therefore, assigning a sign language expert is a move to ensure inclusive assessment and fairness in marking. Currently, there are no special examination papers for people with *Intellectual Impairment (II)*; they attempt the normal examination papers. However, all learners with disabilities are given the additional 20 minutes for each hour of sitting mathematics examination and 10 minutes for each hour of attempting other examinations. Thus, for a three-hour mathematics examination paper, they normally spend 3:45 hours and 3:30 hours for the other subjects. This warrants ample time to respond to examination items. Learners with *Physical Impairment (PI)* experiencing writing difficulties are served with objective test items to reduce essay writing load. However, the objective test items are carefully set to strengthen the weight. Subsection 4 of the NECTA guidelines on assessment procedures for secondary schools and

professional levels (The National Examinations Council of Tanzania, 2021, pp. 74-75) insists;

Assessment of learners with special needs should consider the nature of their disabilities. Assessment for learners with physical impairments depends on the type and nature of their disabilities. For example, learners who are unable to write using hands should not be given tests that require them to write, such as essay questions. Learners who are completely unable to write, do examinations orally, and their responses are recorded.

The test for learners with total blindness should be written using Braille Notation. Besides, if the test items contain maps or drawings, they should be transformed into wording. Moreover, tests for learners with low vision should use enlarged font size. Considering the nature of the disability, examiners should give all learners extra 10 minutes for each hour in all subjects, except in Mathematics, whose extra time is 20 minutes for each hour.

With such approaches, one would ask him/herself whether the initiatives taken by NECTA are adequate enough to ensure inclusive assessment in Tanzania? Perhaps the discussion below may help us to reflect on this question.

Performance of Students with Disabilities

The data indicate that most students with special needs (learners with disabilities) fail their final examinations. For instance, in 2017, out of 89 deaf students who sat for the Certificate of Secondary Education Examination in 30 Examination Centres, only 29 passed the examination as Table 1 below summarises. Surprisingly, no one attained Division One. Only four (4) of them attained Division Two, three (3) of them attained Division Three, and the rest (22) attained Division Four. This confirms poor performance amongst deaf students in Tanzania.

Table 2: Performance of Deaf Candidates for 2017 CSEE

Sex	Sat	Passed	%	Division Attained				
				I	II	III	IV	0
F	37	15	40.54	0	2	1	12	22
M	52	14	26.92	0	2	2	10	38
T	89	29	32.58	0	4	3	22	60

Source: National Examination Council of Tanzania [NECTA] (2018)

Studying the data from Njombe Viziwi Secondary School's performance for five years (2013 - 2017) it is also revealed that deaf students do not perform well.

Table 3: Analysis of Performance for Njombe Viziwi for Five Years

Year	Sat	Passed	%	Division Attained				
				I	II	III	IV	0
2013	38	8	21.05	0	0	2	6	30
2014	22	2	9.09	0	1	1	0	20
2015	25	9	36.00	0	0	1	8	16
2016	25	5	20.00	0	0	0	5	20
2017	21	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	21

Source: National Examination Council of Tanzania [NECTA] (2018)

The data from 2013 to 2017 (5 consecutive years) suggests that — Njombe Viziwi performed below average. It is noted that few students passed their examination. It is further recorded that all the candidates in 2017 scored Division '0' (Zero). It is likely to note similar performance across other categories of disabilities when their circumstances are subjected to critical analysis. Such performance triggers questions and concerns whether test items and assessment processes are fairly and inclusive enough to gauge candidates with disabilities.

The Learning and Assessment Environment for Learners with Disabilities in Tanzania

In 2020, the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) established a guideline for implementing the curriculum for ordinary-level secondary education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. In this guideline, TIE recommends the availability of a multidisciplinary team to support deaf and hard-of-hearing students depending on their needs. The guideline mentions experts such as teachers, itinerant teachers, Tanzanian Sign Language (TSL) interpreters, educational audiologists, educational psychologists, social workers, counsellors, and educational speech-language therapists. Others are educational administrators, curriculum developers, health specialists, educational quality assurers, examination specialists, educational researchers, and practitioners (Tanzania Institute of Education, 2020). The mentioned experts are expected to assist the deaf and hard-of-hearing students at the ground level.

All these players are expected to possess practical skills in TSL as relevant tool for supporting deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Examining the real-life situation in many Tanzanian schools, the situation is not favourable as suggested by the guidelines (Mkama & Storbeck, 2023). The majority of experts are not available in most schools. Consequently, the deaf and hard-of-hearing students are not getting the expected assistance. One would argue that such poor performance of the deaf recorded in Tables 1 and 2 reflects the missing assistance from experts during teaching and learning processes. It should be learned that other learners with other types of disabilities also face similar challenges. It is noted that NECTA serves learners with Hearing Impairment (HI) with traditional examination items. However, the papers are marked with sign language experts as sometimes they tend to use dropping conjunctions when responding to questions. This paper holds that such approach is not sufficient to ensure inclusive

assessment. It should be noted that fairness is maintained when such experts are involved from the beginning throughout the development of test items, invigilation and marking. Such efforts could give them a chance to advise the best way to assess these learners inclusively. Currently, there is nowhere these experts are involved from the earliest stages of assessment. It is suggested here that there should be involvement of experts from the beginning of the assessment exercise. As noted previously, there are no special examination papers for people with Intellectual Impairment (II); the candidates with Intellectual Impairment attempt normal examination papers given to other students, with additional time to take examinations. Such approach raises some questions. For instance, one would ask, who determines whether a person is intellectually impaired and not a slow learner?

Currently, Tanzania does not have mechanisms to screen all children before they are admitted to schools (Namirembe, 2019). How have these learners been taught? Through which curriculum have these learners been taught? Who teaches these students? All these questions contribute to how these learners should be taught and assessed. It is recorded that an intellectually impaired child is characterized by low intelligence/mental ability and a lack of skills necessary for day-to-day living (Byrd, 2022). It is argued here that assuming such kinds of learners would have a relatively similar capability to those displayed by normal learners is wrong. Therefore, it is quite unfair to assess these learners with examination items similar to those attempted by normal learners. The proper identification should be well planned to enable these learners taught using different curriculum, and hence varied assessment methods. Consequently, it is argued here that the currently used curriculum and assessment methods do not guarantee inclusive assessment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The key theme of this paper is inclusive assessment; the purpose is to establish whether inclusive assessment is a myth or a reality. The paper has highlighted the principles of inclusive assessment and how NECTA has strategised to propel efforts towards inclusive assessment. In this paper, it is learned that five categories of learners with special needs have been accommodated by NECTA during examination sessions. These are learners with Total Blindness (TB), learners with Low Vision (LV), learners with Hearing Impairment (HI), learners with Intellectual Impairment (II), and learners with Physical Impairment (PI). The paper has further brought to readers' attention how NECTA is leveraging inclusive assessment by ensuring that a friendly environment is created to accommodate learners with impairments. By doing so, one would assume that NECTA is working hard to adhere to the principles of inclusive assessment, and hence inclusivity in assessment is a reality.

However, if one looks at the challenges and weaknesses discussed in the previous two sections, s/he would easily conclude that inclusive assessment in Tanzania is still a myth. It is argued here that NECTA alone cannot address all the challenges of inclusive assessment. Other stakeholders including the government, NGOs and international organisations can be engaged to address the challenges. Nevertheless, one thing needs to be noted, NECTA does not have the guiding policy for inclusive assessment. The lack of policy and other associated challenges presented in the fore pages need to be acted upon to counteract the situation. However, this paper notes that NECTA is on the final stages of developing the policy guideline for inclusive assessment. It is believed that with such policy document and other initiatives to address the challenges, NECTA and Tanzania in general will improve significantly on inclusive assessment. In most cases, assessment is perceived lightly focusing on standardised tests. It is recommended here that it is necessary to view assessment as a

measurement of learning outcomes, thus, serving multiple purposes; hence, requires multiple modalities. This is a key step to address misunderstandings and eliminate barriers to inclusive assessment. If that is taken on board, inclusive assessment will prevail and all learners will be part and parcel of the assessment process. The emphasis of inclusive education is mainly on the placement; thus, inclusive education is regarded as the opposite of segregated education (UNESCO, 2020). This is misleading because the key point is that all students need the best education. For inclusive education to hold its significance, it should provide all students with relevant learning opportunities in mainstream settings; it should support all learners in their learning endeavours.

It should be noted that assessment is a key component of that support as its output guides the teaching and learning processes. Policy statements are required to address the negative impacts of assessment and improve inclusive assessment. For instance, to ensure fair assessment of individuals with special needs, inclusive assessment policies at national and school levels need to be developed. Without such policies, exclusion in assessment processes will remain predominantly, hence, leaving out a good number of people with disabilities. Thus, NECTA should propel necessary efforts to finalise the policy document for inclusive assessment. In addition, guidelines developed by (Tanzania Institute of Education, 2020) need to be fully implemented; there should also be guidelines to teach and assess other segments of learners with other types of disabilities accommodated by NECTA and other assessment bodies.

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