

MULTI-LEVEL, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FRAMEWORKS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE, MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Topic summaries:

Development of a framework

School improvement

Accountability

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

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INTRODUCTION

With education systems becoming ever more complex, each country needs a unified framework for quality assurance, monitoring and accountability. The Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Accountability (QAMA) activity, carried out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), seeks to identify the essential elements of a framework that brings all aspects of an education system together. Please visit the [QAMA activity web area](#) to learn more about this work.

The QAMA activity identified four key aspects of a whole-system framework. The QAMA [Background and development](#) report and [Guidelines for use](#) explore these in greater depth. In addition, EASNIE produced short summary papers on these key topics. This document presents three of these summary papers. A further summary paper and accompanying video on 'Collection and use of data in inclusive education' are available on the [EASNIE website](#).

Each of the summary papers provides an overview of one topic and a short reference list. In addition to their role in the QAMA framework, these topics are important and relevant for all of EASNIE's [Thematic Country Cluster Activities](#) (TCCA).

The three summaries presented here are as follows:

- [Development of a multi-level, multi-stakeholder quality assurance, monitoring and accountability framework](#). This outlines the international evidence base and context for the framework and gives an overview of the essential steps in its development, and inherent elements and processes.
- [School improvement in the context of the QAMA framework: An overview](#). Improvement at school level, developed and evidenced through a coherent system of quality assurance, monitoring and accountability, plays a key role in improving the whole education system. This summary explores what might be considered as improvement and some of the ways this may be implemented at school level.
- [Accountability for continuous improvement in education](#). All stakeholders, at every level of education, should be accountable for their role in implementing the vision and the concrete aims of the education system, clearly articulating what they have done and why. This summary explores different forms of accountability, identifying a range of actions and challenges in implementation across national, regional and school levels.

DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTI-LEVEL, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER QUALITY ASSURANCE, MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

The QAMA framework aims to provide a holistic overview of structures and processes to inform the development of quality assurance, monitoring and accountability across country education systems. The framework draws on international research and previous European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) work (e.g. Ecosystem Model – see EASNIE, 2016 and 2017; Key Principles – see EASNIE, 2021a; Country Policy Review and Analysis – see EASNIE, 2021b; and the Continuous Improvement model developed with Ministry of Education in Poland under the Structural Reform Support Programme – unpublished).

From this work, several underpinning principles can be identified:

- A focus on equity and non-discrimination. This requires clarity about key concepts and a common understanding of what equity means in practice. Strong leaders can develop a system without labels that responds to the diversity of each learner.
- A commitment to collaboration between different sectors, services and system levels, with co-ordinated planning and agreed goals and indicators.
- Attention to a culture of continuous improvement using data/information to monitor equity, efficiency and effectiveness and build capacity. Stakeholders should be supported to develop the necessary skills/knowledge to fulfil roles and responsibilities so they can be held accountable in a fair way.
- A balanced view of learner and school development in quality assurance. This requires learner and stakeholder involvement to develop quality criteria that consider learners' academic, social, emotional and physical development and give credit to schools for providing a full range of opportunities/support services to benefit ALL learners.
- Agreement across all system levels about the purpose of education. This may include competences in citizenship, skills for adult life, participation in the community and success in further training and employment.

The QAMA framework is supported by the Thematic Country Cluster Activities (TCCA) literature review (EASNIE, 2024). This highlights the need for:

- **Strong leadership at all system levels.** Leaders can ensure that stakeholders understand the purpose of data/information collection that aligns with key questions and priorities arising from their commitment to meeting the needs of all learners. Teachers and leaders can justify their actions, identify challenges and reflect on further improvement. They also need knowledge to support the formative use of data for improvement and summative data for accountability.

- **Strong relationships and effective networking and communication at all levels between different sectors and services to support inclusive practice.** Beyond professional staff, this should involve families, community stakeholders, etc. A range of perspectives informs improvement and the development of broad quality criteria and improvement plans. Expectations may differ among services/professional roles and need to be co-ordinated to ensure the best provision for all learners. Adams, Harris and Jones suggest that: ‘the process of collaboration itself reflects what inclusion is all about’ (2016, p. 67).

Regarding a holistic view of the education system, the literature also stresses the importance of an agreed long-term vision and goals to bring about consistency and coherence. This may provide an opportunity to ‘streamline’ laws and policies which have historically been left in place or amended but now add to the complexity. Plans need to clarify roles and responsibilities and connect different elements, with agreed indicators that balance the need for both regulation and flexibility to ensure equity and include all learners.

Golden (2020) highlights that there is often a disconnect (e.g. due to silo working) between education management and information systems and policy analysis at national level. Data and information from different agencies and services needs to be integrated and co-ordinated to ensure learning and improvement, and to support future policy decisions committed to quality and equity. A balanced approach is needed to ensure that appropriate information is used in a formative way (i.e. for improvement), while information on ‘key measures’ can be summarised and used for accountability purposes (summative). At school level, a full picture is needed – of learners and of school performance with a clear view of what information is passed to local/national level and how this is used.

Monitoring and evaluation should consider the structures and processes, inputs and outcomes relating to:

- Governance – including regulatory frameworks, responsibilities, education provision for diverse learners
- Resourcing – general and targeted distribution
- Developing capacity – raising awareness of/preparing for learner diversity, recruiting and retaining staff, evaluation
- School interventions – match to learners, support for diversity, engagement with parents and community.

The QAMA framework has the potential to bring all these elements together in a flexible way to consider how well the system is working for all learners. Countries need to move from a focus on compensation towards more prevention and intervention approaches that tackle any potential difficulties at an early stage. This is likely to be more effective and more cost-effective than providing intensive – and costly – interventions later.

The TCCA literature review (EASNIE, 2024) shows that many countries lack a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation that can examine:

- the extent to which all learners are present in the system, fulfilling their right to education (in the wake of COVID-19);
- whether all learners really participate and are engaged in the full range of opportunities – that any barriers are overcome so rights within education are also fulfilled;
- the extent to which all learners make the best possible progress in all areas of development towards positive outcomes and successful futures, supporting the right to community participation and lifelong learning.

The holistic overview provided by the framework should make it possible to look back at successful policies, look across to avoid overlaps and possible conflicts, and – importantly – look forward, streamlining work for efficient use of scarce resources but keeping sight of the importance of a high-quality, inclusive education for all learners.

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE QAMA FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW

Improvement at school level, developed and evidenced through a coherent system of quality assurance, monitoring and accountability, plays a key role in improving the whole education system. The school may be seen both as the central element for improvement and as a microcosm of the education system. At both school and system level, various elements and internal and external factors support or constrain different actors, structures and processes. Hence, the elements of the QAMA system-level quality assurance, monitoring and accountability framework may be adapted for school level.

The QAMA framework presents a shared vision for the education system, linking all elements in a process of continuous feedback, progress and improvement. A shared vision should align **‘what a school says and what it does’**, harmonise policy and practice and engage the whole school community in on-going enquiry, keeping on course during the change process (Tran, 2017, p. 2). Key questions to be considered in the context of local and national policy include:

- What are the desired outcomes of the education system?
- What type of learners does the country want or need?
- What is valued as success in the school system?

This will clarify the meaning of school improvement and enable the development of an informed process that uses data/information effectively to improve schools and the education they provide for all learners. To this end, the QAMA framework supports a focus on leadership, teaching, learning, data analysis, collaboration/community partnerships and learner well-being, setting out how various elements inter-relate to enhance school quality and system improvement.

McKinsey & Company (2024) established seven key levers for school improvement:

- ‘Set fewer priorities to get more done’
- ‘Cultivate leadership beyond a single leader’
- ‘Engage educators and families authentically’
- ‘Create coordination and a cadence for change’
- ‘Build implementation structures and skills’
- ‘Measure student outcomes and make them transparent’
- ‘Roll out what works, but create space for innovation’.

Clearly, school leadership is central to improvement. Leaders should:

- challenge the status quo;
- focus on ‘team over self’;

- build trust through effective communication;
- set high expectations;
- create ‘a commonly owned plan for success’;
- have ‘a high sense of urgency’ for improving learner outcomes;
- have ‘a commitment to continuous improvement’ for self and the organisation;
- build ‘external networks and partnerships’ (Kirtman & Fullan, 2016, pp. 13–15).

It is important that schools set realistic goals and expectations, taking account of factors that are within their control or that may need to involve regional/national decision-makers and/or cross-sector services. With careful planning, influences such as socio-economic factors may be mitigated to some extent by school policy and practice. This will require flexibility and autonomy, balanced with accountability measures that are sensitive to school/learner circumstances.

To develop a plan, schools need to know ‘where they are’ in terms of policy, practice and the impact on learner outcomes. A review to establish shared understanding and baseline measures is crucial to enable the measurement of future progress towards targets and goals that address priorities. Evidence can be gathered from formative and summative assessment of learners, including qualitative and quantitative data, and from internal and external evaluation of policy and practice. Action plans and clear success criteria should be developed to support monitoring.

Schools should reflect on the effectiveness of their action plans, the sustainability of improvement measures, and any unintended outcomes. Importantly, they should use feedback to learn and inform on-going improvement. School improvement should be measured with reference to **both school practices and learner outcomes**, rather than by focusing solely on one or the other (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014).

Improving the quality of teaching is crucial in improving learner outcomes and requires an environment that supports rather than controls teachers. Effective initial teacher preparation and on-going appraisal and development should enable all teachers to teach increasingly diverse learner groups. Peer learning between different stakeholders within and between schools and that also involves different sectors can play a key role. Successful school systems focus on teachers in the classroom, using evidence-based strategies to encourage innovation and improve practice.

Multiple measures are needed to assess improvement, growth and progress. These include, for example, measures for:

- academic attainment;
- wider learning (social and emotional learning, school attendance and engagement);
- teacher learning and multi-agency collaboration;
- school environment and organisation;
- connections with stakeholders and resources to support diversity.

Both qualitative and quantitative data are required, with learner outcome data disaggregated for factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, etc., to ensure that any barriers to learning for certain groups can be addressed. Measures may compare the performance of cohorts over time, examine changes in a cohort's academic performance between two points in time or look at learner growth over time and whether the school has added value above the expected performance given school/learner characteristics.

In using data/information, schools should consider whether:

- 'measures of changes are **comparable** over time and possibly across different measurement instruments';
- 'changes are **large** enough and **reflective of real improvements** rather than random fluctuations or differences in data collection processes';
- 'conclusions about improvement are based on **sound evidence of trends** over an extended period (Masters, 2016)' (Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, 2016, p. 7).

To conclude, as the QAMA model states, data from learner assessment, self-/external review, staff appraisal, support and development and data on use of resources has the potential to enhance schools and support them to provide a high-quality inclusive education for all.

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ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION

Governments are accountable for their duties under key international and European conventions, such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), as well as European Union-level indicators. These duties include:

- the right to education: ensuring that education is granted to everyone without discrimination;
- rights in education: respecting learners' rights within the learning environment and reflecting them in curricula, materials and methodologies;
- rights through education: promoting democratic values and respect for human rights (Meijer, 2010).

For both accountability and improvement purposes, governments (and, in turn, schools) must have a widely agreed vision of what high-quality inclusive education looks like at policy level and in practice, where national laws and policies on education impact directly on the experience of learners in schools and classrooms. All stakeholders, at every level of education, should be accountable for their role in implementing the vision and the concrete aims of the education system, clearly articulating what they have done and why.

The term **accountability** may be used in two senses:

- **Accountable to** means to indicate or prove to another (usually higher) level (e.g. government or organisation) that you have fulfilled what is required by law or agreement.
- **Accountable for** means to take responsibility for and ownership of decisions and actions taken and for their consequences.

Schools have a responsibility for their actions and must 'keep track' of progress with a coherent system of monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance. In addition to employers/governments (contractual accountability), they must be accountable to:

- learners, parents, families and communities (moral responsibility);
- colleagues (professional accountability);
- the 'market' (where there is a choice of institution: market accountability).

At all system levels, accountability may be **vertical**, **horizontal** and/or **inclusive** (Gilbert, 2012).

In a **vertical** system, each level must account to a higher level for the extent of its achievements against set targets or indicators. This may rely on internal and external evaluation (such as review, audit or inspections). In particular, external evaluation can provide public assurance and accountability, as well as an evidence base for professional advice to inform the development of national policy. It can also support the spread of

‘best practice’ across the system (Maxwell & Staring, 2018, p. 12). However, potential adverse consequences may occur when ‘high stakes’ measures are used. For example, there may be:

- ‘impact on the style and climate in which inspections take place’, leading to poor ownership and reduced commitment rather than improvement;
- prioritisation of a limited range of ‘hard data’ in arriving at judgements and using a standardised methodology to justify decisions (ibid., p. 13).

Horizontal processes may be more informal, cross-sectoral and occur within and between schools, involving a wide range of stakeholders including communities, families and learners. Such measures may be more closely aligned to an improvement rather than an accountability culture.

In an **inclusive** model, accountability is professionally owned, not externally imposed. Here, stakeholders take responsibility for being accountable to individual learners, families and communities, by sharing information and data, using the autonomy available to them within the education system (Gilbert, 2012).

Across these models, accountability can serve the following functions:

- **Summative** – holding key school-system stakeholders to account for their results and ensuring that processes comply with regulations. This may include policies and activities to ensure that quality standards and objectives covering different areas of school education (e.g. teaching, learning, learners’ assessments, school climate, teacher training, etc.) are met.
- **Formative** – focusing on improving practices and results (e.g. recommendations for improvement, action plans, support measures, etc.) (European Commission, 2015).

In the context of the increasingly diverse school population, accountability frameworks need to focus on the system’s ability to cope effectively and equitably with the diversity of learner profiles, creating a balance between efficiency, effectiveness and equity and considering that:

- efficiency focuses on the improvement of ‘cost-benefit relationships within systems’;
- effectiveness aims at ‘better educational outcomes for learners as well as other stakeholders’;
- equity ensures ‘equitable educational opportunities through respect for diversity and the elimination of discrimination’ (Watkins & Ebersold, 2016, p. 231).

Here, effectiveness and efficiency may align more closely with the use of summative information to hold stakeholders to account. Examining equity and inclusion may require more formative data/information and will be at the core of the improvement agenda.

In the context of decentralisation, school leaders play a crucial role, with autonomy to make decisions about school direction and organisation that impact on equity and inclusion. It is essential, therefore, that leadership accountability mechanisms are aligned

with other policies to support inclusion (UNESCO, 2020). The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2020) has produced a policy framework to support inclusive school leadership, providing guidance on a rights-based approach to support equity, synergy between policy and inclusive school leadership practice, and a balance between the three key policy levers of access, autonomy and accountability.

In this complex area of work, several possible challenges have been identified. These include:

- a lack of a shared vision across all educational stakeholders which can lead to ‘a gap between formulations and realizations of inclusive education’ (Haug, 2017, p. 206) and result in poor outcomes for some learners;
- a culture of high-stakes accountability which can lead to a loss of trust among some stakeholders, where inspections and targets are seen as a method of control;
- contexts where governments provide funding and set the legal framework, but where stakeholders must account for funds and ensure compliance with laws over which they have no control;
- alignment of practice to external sets of standards or outcomes that can undermine professional accountability.

This highlights the need for a strategic approach to quality assurance, built on trust and focused on continuous improvement for learners and wider stakeholders. Differences in views and interests of stakeholder groups need to be resolved through consultation and dialogue so that quality assurance is not seen as imposed in a ‘top down’ fashion (OECD, 2013) and collaboration is supported in the interests of all learners and system stakeholders.

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