

A balanced approach to large-scale assessments

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Assessment (Photo credits: Pixabay)

Education is a topic on which everyone likes to have an opinion. However, relying on personal biases or unverified opinions, whether in individual choices or policy decisions, can be dangerously misleading. To truly make informed and effective decisions about education, it is crucial to base them on reliable data and thorough, systematic analysis. This is where large-scale assessments (LSAs) come into play for data-driven decision-making in educational governance. Students learning data is increasingly being recognized as a critical component of monitoring mechanisms to measure progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global, regional, and national levels. In India, several LSAs are conducted at national, state and district levels.

Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 was conducted on December 4, 2024, to assess the core competencies of students as outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 across the foundational, preparatory, and middle stages. This assessment aims to evaluate, within the education system, students' performance, strengths and weaknesses in learning at a specific point in

time, identify trends in performance, and highlight areas of improvement. These inferences about educational outcomes, when related to various background variables, such as characteristics of the school, teaching practices, and home environment, provide meaningful insights about educational efforts and necessary interventions that need to be planned.

For LSAs to have a meaningful impact, there must be a shared understanding of their purpose. They should be seen as a measure of the health of the education system. However, when LSA results are widely publicised and used to rank states or districts, they are often viewed as the ultimate measure of educational success. This can shift the focus from the broader aims of education to merely improving test scores. As a result, the curriculum becomes skewed and the focus shifts to subjects tested in LSAs, leaving other important knowledge, skills, values and dispositions under-emphasised.

Another issue is the 'teaching to the test' phenomenon. In the race to improve scores on LSAs, teachers may feel compelled to focus primarily on preparing students for the types of questions or subjects assessed in these assessments. Time spent on model tests and rote learning can come at the expense of skills, like critical thinking and problem-solving. This brings us back to the question of validity in assessment: a lack of understanding of the purpose of LSAs may fail to provide authentic estimates of students' learning levels.

The purpose of LSAs is to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' learning levels. This understanding can be used by various stakeholders to plan interventions, such as improving access to resources; enhancing educational equity across locations, types of schools, and genders; planning teacher professional development; reforming school curricula and assessments; and legitimising educational reforms. For example, information on learning outcomes, particularly where students' performance is lowest across all the subjects, can help textbook writers reconsider how content is presented to achieve these outcomes. Policymakers can allocate resources to improve school infrastructure, teacher training, and access to learning materials, with the goal of bridging the gap between rural and urban students. Similarly, teacher educators can use LSA data to identify subject-specific skills where students consistently underperform and use this information to plan workshops and discussions

aimed at improving teaching-learning through a deeper understanding of the core nature of the subjects.

Among the teaching community, there is often a perception that LSA data is primarily useful for administrators and policymakers. However, it is important to note that, although these assessments do not provide student-level data, they offer valuable insights into trends in student learning outcomes. These insights can serve as a trigger for tailoring pedagogy and assessments accordingly, as well as for sharing best teaching practices for these learning outcomes on various teacher forums. LSAs use standardised, competency-based assessments designed against national benchmarks for student learning. Teachers can assess whether their classroom assessments align with these benchmarks and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly.

In India, where the education system is diverse and complex, LSA data should be inferred considering the context in which students are learning. LSAs are costly to implement. On one hand, underutilising them could result in a colossal waste of resources and public funds. On the other, overzealous use could lead to costly policy-level errors with far-reaching repercussions. Hence, striking a balance is key to ensuring that LSAs serve their true purpose effectively.

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