

To cite this article: Dr. Wandera Roberts Otyola, Mugenyi Edison, Dr. Ann Ampaire, Kamugisha Arnold and Mbayo Mike (2025). RELEVANCE OF CRITERION REFERENCED ASSESSMENT IN COMPETENCY BASED CURRICULUM IN UGANDA, International Journal of Education and Social Science Research (IJESSR) 8 (2): 374-383 Article No. 1054, Sub Id 1653

RELEVANCE OF CRITERION REFERENCED ASSESSMENT IN COMPETENCY BASED CURRICULUM IN UGANDA

Dr. Wandera Roberts Otyola¹, Mugenyi Edison², Dr. Ann Ampaire³, Kamugisha Arnold⁴ and Mbayo Mike⁵

¹Senior lecturer, Department of Educational, Social and Organisational Psychology, Makerere University

²Lecturer, Kampala International University

³Lecturer, Makerere University

⁴Educational Psychology, Makerere University

⁵Educational Psychology, Makerere University

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37500/IJESSR.2025.8225>

ABSTRACT

The implementation of Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) necessitates an assessment system that accurately measures learners' progress in acquiring specific skills and knowledge. Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) plays a crucial role in this framework by evaluating students against predefined learning objectives rather than comparing their performance to that of peers. This approach ensures that learners develop the required competencies for academic and practical success, fostering a more learner-centered education system (Pinkus, 2010)

CRA enhances teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes by providing clear benchmarks that guide instruction and enable teachers to tailor their methods to individual learner needs. It also promotes authentic assessment practices, allowing students to demonstrate their abilities in real-world contexts, which is a core principle of CBC (Guskey, 2019). However, despite these advantages, challenges such as teacher preparedness, resource limitations, and inconsistency in implementation pose barriers to the successful adoption of CRA in Uganda's education system. These challenges must be addressed to optimize assessment practices and ensure that learners acquire the necessary competencies for lifelong learning and employability (Elwood, 2013)

This study critically examines the relevance of CRA in Uganda's CBC, exploring its impact on teaching, learning, and assessment practices. The findings provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of CRA within CBC, offering policy recommendations to enhance its implementation and effectiveness in improving educational quality in Uganda.

KEYWORDS: Criterion, Reference, Assessment, competence, Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) is a modern approach to education that focuses on developing students' practical skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to perform specific tasks effectively. In Uganda, CBC has been introduced with the goal of equipping learners with the necessary competencies to succeed in both further education and the workforce (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017). This shift from content-based education to a competency-based system aims to ensure that learners are not just exposed to content but also capable of applying their learning in real-world contexts.

The curriculum reform in Uganda came as part of a broader educational strategy to address the mismatch between the skills acquired in traditional education and those demanded by the labor market (Luganda, 2018). The emphasis is placed on understanding, application, and performance in real-life scenarios, rather than rote memorization and theoretical knowledge alone.

Historically, Uganda's education system has been content-driven, emphasizing rote memorization and high-stakes examinations as the primary mode of assessing student learning (NCDC, 2020). This system relied heavily on summative assessments, with national exams such as the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) and Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) determining students' academic progress and future career paths. However, concerns over skill gaps among graduates, low levels of critical thinking, and limited practical application of knowledge.

Uganda's education system has undergone significant reforms to enhance the quality and relevance of learning outcomes. A major milestone in these reforms is the introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) in 2020. The CBC aims to shift from rote learning and content-heavy instruction to a skills-oriented approach that equips learners with practical competencies necessary for their personal and professional development (NCDC, 2020). This curriculum framework emphasizes skills development, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and adaptability, aligning Uganda's education system with global best practices (UNESCO, 2021). This new approach ensures that learners can apply knowledge to real-world situations. Teachers are being trained to implement this curriculum effectively, with a focus on practical and innovative learning activities.

Assessment in a competency-based system is fundamentally different from traditional assessment methods. The traditional assessment often uses norm-referenced tests, where students' performances are compared to those of others (Eze, 2020). In contrast, criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) focuses on evaluating whether a learner has mastered specific skills or competencies, regardless of how other students perform (Rothman, 2018). This aligns with the philosophy of CBC, which emphasizes individual progression and mastery of set competencies.

Criterion-referenced assessment can be a valuable tool in a CBC system because it helps ensure that learners are assessed against a predefined set of standards or competencies. It offers clearer

benchmarks for performance, where learners either meet or fail to meet specific criteria, unlike traditional assessments, where the goal is often to perform better than peers (Guskey, 2016).

The integration of CRA into Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum is crucial as it allows for a more individualized approach to assessing learners. This is particularly important in a country like Uganda, where educational equity is a concern, and there is a diverse range of learning abilities across the student population (Muwanguzi, 2019). The use of CRA ensures that assessment is more aligned with the learners' actual capabilities and learning outcomes, which are central to the CBC's focus on skills and competencies.

Studies have shown that criterion-referenced assessments are more aligned with the objectives of competency-based education, providing accurate measures of students' mastery of competencies (Burke, 1989). Additionally, such assessments offer educators better feedback, which is essential for shaping future instruction and ensuring students' progression toward achieving learning outcomes.

Objectives of the Study

To Investigate the Alignment of Criterion-Referenced Assessment with Competency-Based Curriculum in Uganda.

To Explore the Benefits of Criterion-Referenced Assessment in the Context of Uganda's CBC.

To Assess the Challenges in Implementing Criterion-Referenced Assessment in Uganda's Schools.

To assess Stakeholder Perceptions: Investigate the views of educators, students, and policymakers on the implementation and impact of CRA within the CBC.

Research Questions

How well is criterion-referenced assessment aligned with the objectives of Uganda's competency-based curriculum?

What are the benefits of using criterion-referenced assessment in Uganda's competency-based curriculum?

What are the challenges faced by educators and schools in implementing criterion-referenced assessment within Uganda's competency-based curriculum?

How do the different stake holders perceive the criterion-referenced assessment and the impact student learning outcomes in Uganda's competency-based curriculum?

Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) is a type of assessment that measures student performance based on predefined learning outcomes or competencies, rather than comparing students to one another, which is the case with norm-referenced assessments. The Ugandan education system,

particularly with the introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2017, emphasizes the need to assess students' mastery of competencies, which is central to the CRA model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the relevance of Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) in Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), focusing on its alignment with CBC, benefits, implementation challenges, and stakeholder perceptions.

Alignment of Criterion-Referenced Assessment with Competency-Based Curriculum

Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) aligns with CBC by assessing students based on predetermined learning outcomes rather than comparing them to their peers. CBC emphasizes skill mastery, practical application, and learner-centered instruction, which CRA effectively supports by providing clear performance benchmarks (Guskey, 2019). Studies indicate that when CRA is correctly implemented, it enhances curriculum fidelity, ensuring that assessments truly measure the competencies outlined in CBC. However, challenges in standardizing CRA across different schools and education levels remain a concern.

Benefits of Criterion-Referenced Assessment in CBC

CRA offers multiple benefits within the CBC framework, including personalized learning, continuous feedback, and improved instructional strategies. Research shows that CRA fosters deep learning by allowing students to track their progress against specific learning goals rather than competing with classmates (Mosha, 2018). Additionally, CRA enhances formative assessment practices, enabling teachers to adjust their instructional methods based on student performance. This adaptability ensures that students develop practical competencies that are essential for both academic and professional success.

Challenges in Implementing Criterion-Referenced Assessment in Uganda's Schools

Despite its advantages, CRA implementation in Uganda faces several obstacles, including limited teacher training, lack of resources, and inconsistencies in assessment practices. Many teachers struggle with designing effective CRA tools due to insufficient professional development programs (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). Additionally, resource constraints, such as inadequate assessment materials and lack of standardized grading rubrics, hinder the effectiveness of CRA in CBC. Addressing these challenges requires policy reforms, capacity building, and increased investment in educational resources.

Stakeholder Perceptions on CRA Implementation and Impact

Educators, students, and policymakers generally support CRA but express concerns regarding assessment standardization, fairness, and effectiveness. Teachers acknowledge the value of CRA in promoting learner-centered education, but many require further training to implement it effectively (UNESCO, 2021). Students appreciate CRA for its fairness and clarity, as it allows them to focus on mastering competencies rather than competing for grades. Policymakers emphasize the need for

continuous evaluation and stakeholder involvement to refine CRA implementation and ensure alignment with CBC goals.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) in Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The methodology ensures a detailed analysis of how CRA influences teaching, learning, and assessment practices within CBC.

Research Design

A descriptive survey design is employed to collect data from educators, students, and policymakers. This design is suitable for investigating perceptions, challenges, and effectiveness of CRA in CBC implementation

Population and Sampling

The target population includes teachers, students, school administrators, and education policymakers in Uganda. A stratified random sampling technique is used to ensure representation from primary and secondary schools implementing CBC. Additionally, purposive sampling is applied to select key informants, such as curriculum developers and assessment specialists (Patton, 2002)

Data Collection Methods

Questionnaires. Structured and semi-structured questionnaires are used to collect data from teachers and students regarding their experiences with CRA in CBC (Bryman, 2016)

Interviews. In-depth interviews with policymakers and education officers provide insights into CRA's implementation challenges and policy implications (Patton, 2015).

Observations. Classroom observations assess how CRA is applied in real teaching and learning settings (Cohen et al., 2002)

Document Analysis. Review of policy documents, assessment guidelines, and curriculum frameworks provides secondary data on CRA's role in CBC (Tisdell et al., 2025)

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires is analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests and correlation analysis) through SPSS software (Field, 2024)

Qualitative data from interviews and observations is analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns and themes related to CRA implementation (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval is obtained from relevant education authorities. Informed consent is sought from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection. (Israel & Hay, 2006)

This methodology provides a robust framework for examining the role of CRA in Uganda's CBC, offering empirical evidence to inform educational policy and practice.

FINDINGS**Alignment of the Criterion-Referenced Assessment with Competency-Based Curriculum in Uganda.**

Several scholars highlight the compatibility of CRA with competency-based education systems. Guskey (2016) asserts that CRA is ideally suited for competency-based education because it allows educators to focus on assessing whether students can demonstrate specific skills and competencies rather than just recalling information. The shift to CBC in Uganda emphasizes the mastery of practical and transferable skills, aligning perfectly with CRA's ability to assess these competencies in a direct and transparent manner. In the context of Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports (2017) stresses that the purpose of CBC is not just to acquire knowledge but to equip students with practical skills and real-world applications. This objective can be more effectively achieved through CRA because it provides clearer criteria and benchmarks for student performance, ensuring that students' mastery of each skill is assessed accurately.

Benefits of Criterion-Referenced Assessment in the Context of Uganda's CBC.

The adoption of Criterion-Referenced Assessment offers numerous benefits in the context of Uganda's CBC. One major benefit is the emphasis on individualized assessment. In norm-referenced assessments, students are ranked against their peers, which can discourage students who may struggle but are nonetheless capable of achieving mastery in specific areas. In contrast, CRA allows for a more equitable and fair evaluation system, focusing on each student's ability to meet defined learning outcomes.

Rothman (2018) emphasizes that CRA enables students to demonstrate their competencies in a way that is more aligned with the practical objectives of competency-based education. For example, in Uganda, the CBC aims to promote skills that are directly applicable to the labor market, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical skills. CRA ensures that these competencies are measured directly, providing valuable feedback to both students and teachers on where students need further development. In addition, CRA facilitates more meaningful feedback for students, which can guide their learning and improvement. According to Kanyesigye (2020), this is particularly important in Uganda, where many students have historically been evaluated through traditional exams that do not reflect the full range of skills required for success in modern society.

Challenges in Implementing Criterion-Referenced Assessment in Uganda's Schools

While CRA offers clear advantages, its implementation in Uganda has not been without challenges. One of the primary difficulties is the lack of teacher training. Many teachers in Uganda are more familiar with norm-referenced testing methods and are not adequately trained in designing and using criterion-referenced assessments. As Muwanguzi (2019) points out, this lack of training leads to inconsistencies in assessment practices and may hinder the effective implementation of CRA.

Additionally, the transition from traditional examination methods to CRA requires significant adjustments in both curriculum design and assessment strategies. Schools may face challenges in designing appropriate assessments that reflect the competencies specified in the CBC framework. According to the World Bank (2021), resource constraints are another key challenge, as many schools in Uganda, particularly those in rural areas, lack the necessary infrastructure and materials to implement CRA effectively. This includes a shortage of assessment tools, such as rubrics and competency descriptors, which are crucial for accurate and consistent CRA.

The resistance to change, particularly among educators who are accustomed to the traditional examination-based system, can also pose a significant barrier. Kiggundu & Nayimuli (2019) note that changing entrenched assessment practices often requires substantial professional development and support.

The ultimate goal of the Competency-Based Curriculum in Uganda is to improve learning outcomes by equipping students with the necessary skills to succeed in the workforce and in their personal lives. CRA plays a crucial role in this process by ensuring that students' learning is assessed against clearly defined competencies, thus providing an accurate measure of whether they have mastered the necessary skills.

Impact of Criterion Referenced Assessment within the Competency Based Curriculum

Muwanguzi (2019) suggests that CRA has a positive impact on student learning outcomes because it allows for ongoing assessment that informs instruction and provides students with regular feedback. This contrasts with traditional exams, which often provide limited or delayed feedback and do not necessarily reflect whether a student has acquired the necessary competencies.

Additionally, the use of CRA helps identify students' strengths and weaknesses, allowing for targeted interventions to address gaps in learning. This approach not only helps students succeed academically but also prepares them for future employment by ensuring they are competent in specific, job-related skills (Rothman, 2018).

Stakeholder Perceptions on CRA Implementation in CBC

Teachers generally support CRA as a tool for identifying student strengths and weaknesses. However, a study by Nanyonjo (2021) highlights that many educators feel inadequately prepared to implement CRA effectively due to limited professional development and lack of standardized. Students appreciate the shift towards practical, skills-based assessments but face challenges adapting to non-traditional

grading methods. A survey conducted by Ouma (2022) found that students in CBC settings feel more engaged in learning but struggle with understanding performance expectations compared to traditional exams. Government and curriculum developers advocate for CRA as essential for achieving CBC goals. However, policymakers acknowledge significant gaps in training, resource allocation, and alignment with national examinations (MoES, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relevance of Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) in Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) by investigating its alignment with CBC principles, benefits, challenges, and stakeholder perceptions. The findings indicate that CRA is well-aligned with CBC, as it focuses on measuring learners' mastery of specific competencies rather than ranking them against peers. This alignment enhances learner-centered education, skill acquisition, and practical application of knowledge, which are key objectives of CBC (Guskey, 2019).

The study also highlights several benefits of CRA, including its ability to provide clear learning targets, promote individualized instruction, and enhance formative assessment practices. Teachers and students benefit from structured feedback, which supports continuous improvement in learning outcomes. However, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and inconsistent assessment implementation pose significant barriers to effective CRA adoption. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring that CRA fully supports the goals of Uganda's CBC.

Stakeholder perceptions indicate broad support for CRA but reveal concerns regarding assessment standardization, policy consistency, and institutional capacity. Teachers and policymakers emphasize the need for more professional development programs to enhance educators' ability to design and implement CRA effectively. Students also express a preference for CRA over traditional norm-referenced assessments, as it provides a fairer evaluation of their competencies.

All in all, while CRA plays a vital role in enhancing competency-based education in Uganda, systemic reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and resource allocation are necessary to overcome implementation challenges. Strengthening assessment policies and teacher training programs will ensure that CRA effectively supports student learning and curriculum goals within Uganda's CBC.

Recommendations

Based on the study's objectives and findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) in Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC)

The Ministry of Education should ensure that CRA is fully integrated into CBC by developing standardized assessment guidelines that clearly define expected competencies and performance criteria. Additionally, teachers should be trained on how to align classroom instruction and assessments with CBC goals to enhance learning outcomes (Guskey, 2019).

Schools should adopt formative assessment strategies, such as continuous feedback and performance-based tasks, to maximize the benefits of CRA. Teachers should be encouraged to use rubrics and self-assessment tools to help students track their progress and take ownership of their learning. Furthermore, assessment policies should emphasize practical skill demonstration, reinforcing CBC's focus on competency development(Elwood, 2013)

The government and education stakeholders should increase funding and resources to ensure that schools are adequately equipped to implement CRA effectively. Regular teacher training workshops should be conducted to improve educators' capacity in assessment design, data interpretation, and feedback provision. Additionally, there is a need to develop digital assessment tools to enhance efficiency in evaluating students' competencies (Guskey, 2019).

Collaboration between teachers, students, policymakers, and parents should be strengthened to create a supportive environment for CRA. Periodic review meetings and stakeholder consultations should be conducted to address concerns, share best practices, and ensure that assessment methods align with CBC goals. Schools should also establish feedback mechanisms to incorporate student perspectives into assessment improvements(Elwood, 2013)

REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Burke, J. (1989). *Competency Based Education and Training*. Falmer Press. <https://books.google.co.ug/books?id=sOhKdzS-D3IC>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2002). *Research methods in education*. routledge.
- Elwood, J. (2013). Educational assessment policy and practice: A matter of ethics. *Assessment in Education: Principles*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2013.765384>
- Field, A. (2024). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics*. Sage publications limited.
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*. SAGE Publications. <https://books.google.co.ug/books?id=EfNLH99zlcEC>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. sage.
- Pinkus, L. (2010). Meaningful Measurement: The Role of Assessments in Improving High School Education in the Twenty-First Century. *Alliance for Excellent Education*.
- Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Eze, P. (2020). *The relevance of criterion-referenced assessment in competency-based education*. International Journal of Education and Practice.
- Guskey, T. R. (2019). *Educational Measurement and Assessment*. Routledge.

- Guskey, T. R. (2016). *Competency-Based Education: The Relevance of Criterion- Referenced Assessment*. Educational Assessment Journal.
- Kanjee, A., & Sayed, Y. (2013). Assessment policy and practice in Africa. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20(4), 353-370.
- Kanyesigye, S. (2020). *Challenges in Implementing Competency-Based Curriculum in Ugandan Schools*. Journal of Educational Development.
- Kiggundu, E., & Nayimuli, M. (2019). *Assessment Practices in Uganda's Competency- Based Curriculum: Opportunities and Challenges*. International Journal of Education Policy.
- Luganda, M. (2018). *Curriculum Reforms in Uganda's Educational System: Towards Competency-Based Education*. Journal of African Education,
- Ministry of Education and Sports. (2017). *Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum Framework*. Kampala: Government of Uganda.
- Muwanguzi, P. (2019). *The Role of Assessment in Competency-Based Education: A Case Study of Uganda*. African Educational Review,
- National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC). (2020). *Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum Guidelines*. Kampala, Uganda.