

Is Uganda's new O-level curriculum delivering on its promise?



SAVINO AINEMUKAMA

When Uganda's National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) introduced the new lower secondary curriculum in 2020, it made a bold promise: that education would no longer be about memorising facts for an end-of-year examination, but about developing genuinely capable, creative, and well-rounded learners. At the heart of this reform is project-based learning.

Projects are not a minor addition to the new curriculum. They form a core part of this reform. Each project is supposed to be subject-specific, challenging learners to think critically and demonstrate practical, real-world competence using available resources.

For example, a student in agriculture might investigate soil conditions and grow tomatoes or cabbages, while a student in ICT might design a simple mobile application to help local traders track their daily sales and expenses.

Across secondary schools in Uganda, signs of this shift are visible. Students are making liquid soap, engaging in crafts, rearing animals, and developing applications in computer labs. To an unfamiliar observer, this may appear routine, but these activities reflect a structured subject - project-based assessment, now embedded in the curriculum.

However, surface appearances do not tell the full story. A closer look at how projects are being conducted across Uganda's schools reveals significant gaps that risk undermining the very goals the reform seeks to achieve.

To begin with, the quality of project work varies widely. In well-resourced urban schools, students are exploring artificial intelligence and conducting scientific experiments. In many rural schools, however, the same requirement is met through basic artwork or simple crafts that fall far short of the curriculum's

intended depth. This disparity is not simply a resource gap; it reflects a deeper inconsistency in how the curriculum is understood and applied.

Notably, while the curriculum clearly requires subject-specific projects facilitated by individual subject teachers, many schools treat projects as a single standalone activity, with one generic project assessed across multiple subjects, reducing a rich learning experience into an administrative formality.

More concerning are reports that marks are sometimes estimated rather than rigorously awarded. Unlike written examinations, which are centrally standardized and moderated, project assessment is left almost entirely to individual schools.

This is no small matter - projects account for 20 percent of every student's final O-Level grade. Yet, Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) oversight remains thin, with officials rarely inspecting projects to verify that awarded marks reflect the actual work produced.

The stakes create a troubling incentive: no school or teacher wants their students to fail, and where external checks are absent, the temptation to inflate marks is difficult to resist. In some cases, this lack of oversight could even enable schools to reuse projects from previous years, awarding current students marks for work they had no part in. The result is an assessment that may appear functional on paper, but lacks the rigour needed to be truly meaningful.

For the new O-Level curriculum to deliver on its promise, certain things need to change.

First, National Curriculum Development Centre should establish and enforce minimum standards. Subject-specific project frameworks should clearly define what an acceptable project looks like at each phase, from planning

Teachers need continuous, subject-specific support, not just on what to teach, but on how to facilitate, assess, and record project work meaningfully.

through to dissemination - with practical examples relevant to both urban and rural contexts.

Second, UNEB should take a more active role in moderating project assessments. Projects carry 20 percent of every student's final grade and deserve the same rigour as written examinations. Introducing spot inspections and sample reviews would be a practical first step toward closing that gap.

Third, the government should invest in practical, ongoing teacher training. The current approach of one-off workshops has clearly not been sufficient. Teachers need continuous, subject-specific support, not just on what to teach, but on how to facilitate, assess, and record project work meaningfully.

Finally, the government and school administrators should address resource disparities. Low-cost, locally relevant project models should be developed so that rural students can meet the same standards as their urban counterparts. Equally, schools should not charge students extra fees for projects.

Uganda's new O-level curriculum remains one of the most ambitious education reforms the country has undertaken. The promise made in 2020 to move beyond rote memorisation and develop genuinely capable, creative learners is the right one. But a promise is only as good as its implementation.

With stronger standards, meaningful oversight, and deliberate investment, project-based learning can become what it was always meant to be: a genuine measure of what every Ugandan learner knows, can do, and is capable of becoming.

The writer is a Research Associate at Blueprint Consortium Africa