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Formative Continuous Assessment Intervention in Primary Schools from Two Regions in Ethiopia: Perceived Contributions, Challenges, Opportunities and Implications

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Abstract: *Research evidences have consistently revealed that scores they completed Ethiopian children were unable to properly read to learn because they didn't learn to read at the time first cycle primary school. These critical concerns of reading in early grades suggest that the entire classroom approach has to be redressed in a new light. With this in mind, formative continuous assessment (FCA) intervention was conducted with grades 1-4 mother-tongue teachers and principals in selected schools of the Amhara and Tigray regions. The purpose of this assessment was to examine the perceived contributions, challenges, opportunities and implications of this intervention using classroom observations (n=112) and interviews with woreda education experts (n=15), school directors/ vice directors (n=52), and FCA trained teachers (n=52). Findings indicated that the use of knowledge gained through FCA training and the FCA tools supplied were found to yield very encouraging results and contributions. Significant improvements were noted in teachers' motivations and attitudes, pedagogical methods, assessment practices, record keeping, and feed backing. These changes were also noted on student participations and achievements as well. However, these contributions were challenged by different kinds of problems including the design of FCA tools, teacher-related problems, FCA's time consuming nature coupled with large class size, resource-related problems and problem of follow up and supervision. Attempts were made to point out opportunities that could be exploited towards overcoming these challenges and in doing so effectively implementing FCA. It was concluded that FCA expansion, scalability, and continuity need to be considered. To this effect, it was recommended, among others, that there is a need to work out strategies of FCA implementation, widen the scope and coverage of the FCA training, revise the FCA tools, and create school-readiness for FCA implementation.*

Key terms: continuous assessment, formative assessment, mother tongue education, early grade reading

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Introduction

Ethiopia, as a nation, is moving forward by the vision to becoming a middle income country by 2025. Education is inalienably intertwined with this vision; ultimately enabling this dream to come true. Pursuant of this vision, a number of measures have been taken to eventually contribute a share to transforming this nation by transforming the education sector. Obviously, then, huge progress has been documented in the last couple of decades despite the fact that quality concerns (CfBT & VSO, 2008) still persist surprisingly in an era the dominant discourse focus on quality[1].

Lack of quality associated with personnel entering the teaching profession, high turnover of teachers, demotivation of teachers, poor quality of working environment (VSO, 2010; Workneh & Tassew, 2013; Gedefaw, 2012) are some of the problems on the teachers' side. Quality of inputs and processes, while improving, are not being effectively converted into educational gains (MoE, 2015) and, hence, learning levels remain low, drop out and repetition rates are still high (MoE, 2015). Some national data depict that early grade learning in Ethiopia seems to be seriously compromised; if not non-existent (MoE, 2015)[2].In this connection, National Learning Assessments as well as others (like early grade reading assessment) have indicated that primary school children are staggering to read and write at the end of first cycle primary education after "learning basic education" in native language, for four years (MoE, 2008; RTI International, 2010); plus about three years of preschool education (Seid, 2015).

Cognizant of these problems, the Federal Ministry of Education has decided (much earlier than embarking on the task of designing the education road map) to prioritize

[1]*In fact, a national response is currently underway to overhaul the entire education system of the country as we have witnessed through the public discussion forums held in different settings to generate feedback for drafting an education road map of the country for the next fifteen years.*

[2]*For example, early grade reading assessment conducted in 2010 has indicated that 34% of students in Grade 2 were unable to read a single word of a grade- level relevant story; while 48% of students were unable to answer a single comprehension question on a reading comprehension test, and only 5% of students were able to meet the standard for the level. Furthermore, the National Learning Assessment conducted as a benchmark for ESDP IV plan also portrayed a gloomy picture. It was originally targeted that the proportion of those scoring at least 50% shall be 70% of grade 4 students while those scoring at least 75% be 25% of the students. Achievements were alarmingly low; while only 25% scored 50%, only 2.3 % had scored 75% and above.*

quality concerns in its ESDP V program with explicit statement that special efforts will be made to improve the overall literacy and numeracy level of the school-aged population. In a bid to pursue this promise and ensure quality, the Ministry of Education and its partners have been working on different projects that are expected to improve teachers' pedagogical skills for building children' foundational literacy, numeracy and language skills through continuous professional development. One such venture is a formative continuous assessment (FCA) intervention project that was implemented to address the basic early grade literacy problem in Ethiopia.

In fact, continuous assessment is not a new experience in Ethiopia. In its MoE, 1996 policy the Federal Ministry of Education has clearly stipulated that continuous assessment shall be put into effect across all classrooms in the country to ascertain the formation of an all rounded profile of students at all levels. Moving steps further to implement this policy item, attempts were made to develop manuals and guides for continuous assessment (e.g. Tigistu, Alemayehu & Belay, 2004; NoE, 2002; NEAEA, 2014). However, the assessment guides prepared by NEAEA (or former NoE) mainly focused on the traditional summative continuous assessment type. Small scale investigations have also revealed misconceptions of continuous assessment on the ground: merely taken to mean continuous testing (Abiy, 2013), mainly judgmental than developmental (Aytaged, 2010), inconsistent across different settings practices and, therefore, needed for a harmonized continuous assessment policy or guideline (Sentayehu, 2016). It was *less* tuned to enhancing student learning and curriculum intentions (Fisseha, 2010), and, therefore, insufficient to improve the learning and teaching process (Yiheyis and Getachew, 2014). In fact, in a light-touch review of literature on classroom assessments, Browne (2016) discusses the problem rather in a bigger context that, although it is extremely common to find references to CA in policy documents in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and South Asia, continuous assessments are rarely implemented effectively possibly because there is little institutional support for CA, few example materials, and no training, and sometimes this is because teachers do not understand or see the purpose of CA and continue to teach in a top-down manner. According to Browne (2016), most schooling systems have a crippling emphasis on summative exams, and teachers often end up 'teaching to the test' whether they want to or not, and teacher training chronically underprepares teachers for CA; in some cases not giving any training and in others only explaining how to fill in the government mandated CA forms.

The Formative Continuous Assessment (FCA) idea is, of course, a significant departure from the traditional summative continuous assessment practices so characteristic of the Ethiopian classrooms (Abiy, 2013; Aytaged, 2010; Fisseha, 2010; Yiheyis & Getachew, 2014*;* Sentayehu, 2016) and, therefore, incorporating it both in theory (policy level) and practice (classroom level) is like addressing the crux of the problem of education. This is mainly because FCA has been variably referred (as a strategy, a method, a tool, a process, a mechanism, a component) to invariably describe continuous assessment (mainly the formative version) as playing an indispensable and irreplaceable role in the educational process. CA is "a classroom strategy implemented by teachers to ascertain knowledge, understanding and skills attained by pupils" (EQ, 2003), "a method of getting feedback to feedingback practices" (Ellington & Earl, 1997), "a tool that helps teachers select content and method of instruction" (cited in Abiy, 2013), "an ongoing process of decision making about what to teach and how" (Abiy, 2013), and "an approach depicting the full range of sources and methods teachers use to learn to teach" (Airasian,1991).

Formative assessment contrasts with summative assessment. While formative assessments aim at improving education, summative assessments aim at measuring education (Pryor, 2015). In sharp contrast to the notion of summative assessment, it implies a shift from "Assessment of Learning" (summative) to "Assessment as Learning" (formative) (Alausa, 2004) or "Assessment for learning (formative) (Pryor, 2015), and "Assessment of Content" (summative) to "Assessment of Process" (formative) (Ellington & Earl, 1997). In the words of Paul Black, it is formative assessment when a chef tastes the soup while it is summative when a customer does the tasting (cited in Miller-Jones & Greer, 2009, P.166).

The purpose of formative assessment is, then, to inform policy, enrich curriculum, improve classroom practices and then student achievement (Iqbal & Samiullah, 2017; Perry, 2013; Pryor, 2015; Kapambwe, 2010). Evidences show that formative classroom assessments are linked to better student learning outcomes (Clarke, 2012) or academic achievement (Iqbal & Samiullah, 2017; Abejehu, 2016; Kapambwe, 2010)[3], ensure learning progress through proper scaffolding (NRC, 2000) and improve misconceptions about students (NRC, 2001).

3 *For example, Iqbal and Samiullah (2017) experimented on the impact of continuous assessment on achievement against a control group and found statistical significant positive effects on students' achievement. This finding was confirmed in the Ethiopian setting (Abejehu, 2016). The results from a quantitative evaluation study of the comparison in performance of pupils in the FCA pilot schools and control schools have also shown that the FCA pupils' performances were higher compared to the control as well as their results on the baseline tests (Kapambwe, 2010).*

Despite such receptivity to the notions, and importance of FCA among so many educators, its practice was, however, evidenced with tremendous pitfalls (Esere & Idowu, 2009). For example, it was said that administering assessment does not improve educational quality unless changes occur according to the data collected (Perry, 2013). Thus, it is crucial to support teachers' understanding of the purpose of formative assessment (Perry, 2013). A rigorous experimental study has also shown that FCA, as implemented in India, didn't improve literacy and numeracy scores and, therefore, needs a thorough review and revision (Duflo et al., 2015). Experiences from the implementation of the FCA pilot program in Zambia (Kapambwe, 2010) have clearly shown that due to past influences of traditional certifying role of assessment, teachers find it difficult to suddenly change to process-based assessment which is dominated by the use of CA (Browne, 2016; Kapambwe, 2010).

In the light of these apparently contested views, it would then be of great importance to know what we can possibly make of the after mentioned FCA stories in the Ethiopian settings. Would FCA intervention enable us to change the tradition of assessment of learning to assessment for learning? How do these changes impact the teaching-learning process? What specific conditions limit these impacts?

If we have to properly groom the Ethiopian educational landscape, we, therefore, need to test or examine how effectively the various educational strategies work out in Ethiopian and then inform policies and classroom practices through different kinds of interventions including the present FCA intervention.

Hence, this research attempted to answer the following research questions:

- What improvements and contributions can FCA intervention make in the teaching-learning process in Tigray and Amhara regions?
- Would the FCA intervention with teachers in these regions change their attitude and motivation towards a renewed approach to teaching?
- What are the challenges that limit the implementation of FCA in these regions?
- What opportunities are available in these regions that help to manage these challenges?
- What lessons can be drawn from FCA intervention in these regions for future use?

Accordingly, the objective of this research was to assess the implementation of FCA intervention, learn important lessons from it, and then delineate the way forward particularly at this historic moment in which the Federal Ministry of Education is engaged in designing an education road map, policy and curricula materials to overhaul the entire education system of the country; thus requiring evidence-based strategies and approaches to come on board.

Methods

Conceptual framework: Research has shown that a number of internal and external factors would affect quality of education in general and students' learning in particular including student characteristics, pupil-teacher ratios, class sizes, and teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 1999). However, among all these array of important factors, teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 1999), competencies (Tschannen-Moran & Woolflok, 2002; Peery, 2004), skills and knowledge (Tschannen-Moran &Woolflok, 2002; Peery, 2004; Villegas- Reimers, 2003; Leu, 2004) appear most detrimental to quality in general and learning process in particular. Nearly three decades ago, the National Research Council has also confirmed that good teaching really matters (NRC, 2001, p. 4.). Hence, if teachers are positively impacted by the FCA training, then these in turn impact, first and foremost, classroom practices, and then subsequently student learning and achievement. Guskey (1996) has presented a model of teacher development in which teachers

Through changes when engaging in professional development programs (Fig. 1).

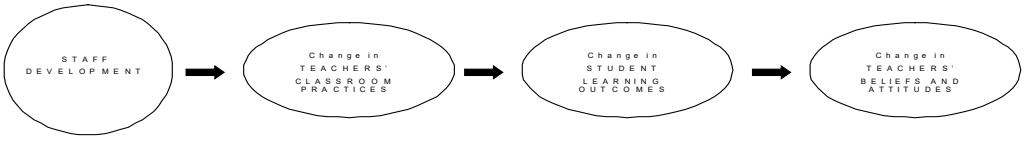

Figure 1: A Model of the process of Teacher Change (Guskey, 1996)

According to this model, new professional experience (e.g. training) triggers the change process; mainly changing the classroom practices. This, in turn transforms the student learning and an outcomes, this, in turn, promotes changes in teacher's beliefs and attitudes. Hence, of the available several models of teachers' professional development in literature, this model is used for our present purpose because it is the most widely

used, very practical, and relevant for the purpose at hand. It upholds that FCA intervention empowers teachers professionally and technically and this empowerment positively impacts their classroom practices. This changed classroom practice in turn makes a positive impact on student learning outcomes that eventually change teachers' beliefs and attitudes about their teaching performances. Teachers perceived views about FCA training contributions in this entire process (teaching, learning, and assessment) are explored along with factors that work against this contribution (challenges), opportunities available to contend with these challenges, and the way forward.

The FCA intervention project: The knowledge, skills and attitude needed for quality teaching could not fully develop during pre-service teacher education alone (Leu, 2004; Moon, Butcher, & Bird, 2000) and, hence, teachers need to be provided with on- the- job professional assistance and training. In the light of the model above, the FCA intervention project assumes that insufficient teacher training is frequently identified as a barrier to implementation and change (Perry, 2013) mainly because lack of competencies affects motivation and self-confidence; this perception about their ability to make difference in student achievement in turn determines the successful implementation of professional activities in the classroom (Coto, 2010).

In this manner, the FCA intervention was initiated in 2016 as part of a two-year intervention work. Attempts were made to develop and distribute FCA tools, deliver FCA training for mother tongue language (MTL) teachers, principals, and supervisors. This initiative has properly integrated the instrumental role of continuous assessment with the already existing summative role of assessment. Training on the use of FCA tools was delivered for 1445 (704 males and 741 females) Mother Tongue Language (MTL) teachers, principals, supervisors, zonal, woreda, and regional education bureau experts. The FCA tools developed and produced included A4 Flashcard, A6 Flashcard, Graphic Organizers (Knowledge, Want to learn, and Learned [KWL], Mind Map, Web Map, Context and Connection Map, and Sequence Map), Index Card, Letter Recognition Record Sheet, Writing Rubric, and Pocket Chart.

A4 and A6 Flashcards were designed to assess identification of letters, sight words, and target letters from scrambled group of letters, recognition of word formation, and segmenting and blending skills of mainly Grade 1 and Grade 2 students. Graphic Organizers were designed to assess Grade 3 and Grade 4 students' skills of visualizing and organizing information, critical thinking skill, and new ways of connecting information. KWL is a three-column chart designed to assess students' skill of organizing ideas about

a topic before, during, and after discussion. Mind Map, on the other hand, is a map that visually represents hierarchically ordered information and designed to assess skills like the development of vocabularies, concept naming, phrase construction, and sentence construction. Web Map is one of the Graphic Organizers designed to assess students' ability to categorize and write main and supporting concepts. Context and Connection Map, on the other hand, helps to think in a context and designed to assess students' ability to infer meaning from other words, form new words, and draw meaning from the connection. Sequence Map contains a series of boxes and arrows used to record the steps involved in certain activities. Students are expected to fill these boxes or arrows with distinct activities that come in order to accomplish a certain task. Index Card is a reusable plane A6 card used to assess letter and word recognition and also segmenting and blending skills of Grade 1 and Grade 2 students. On this card a teacher can write a targeted letter of a week and ask a student to identify the letter or write a decodable word and ask a student to segment it. Pocket Chart is a plastic with many separate pockets to keep flashcards or index cards with a word or letter written on it. It is useful to assess letter identification, word formation, and sentence construction skills of Grade 1 and Grade 2 students. The other FCA tools used in student assessment are Letter Recognition Record Sheet, and Writing Rubric. As the names indicate these tools were designed for the purpose of recording students' progress in their learning to read. Letter Recognition Record Sheet was designed to be used mainly with Grade 1 students while Writing Rubric was designed to be used with other grade levels.

The first round of FCA learning and experience sharing was conducted in April, 2017 in Oromia, Tigray and Amhara regional states where a total of 1385 (672 male and 713 female) participants attended. However, as a follow-up to the first-round learning and experience sharing meeting, assessment was conducted to determine the status of the implementation of FCA activities only in Amhara and Tigray regions. The assessment also included learning and experience sharing meetings with teachers and supervisors.

Research Design*:* Mixed-design (Qual + Quan) with the concurrent variant procedure was employed for data collection and analysis. While the qualitative approach was the major orientation that was followed, the quantitative aspect was limited only to examining classroom corrective strategies and provision of feedback. However, the focus was on getting the views of multiple participants on FCA implementation and hence emphasis was on qualitative data.

Sampling*:* The assessment followed multi-stage sampling design to collect data: region, zone, woreda, and schools from two regional states. Tigray and Amhara Regional States were selected for the assessment by default as they were pilot intervention regions. Three zones which were considered for pilot intervention were selected from the Tigray Regional State and 4 zones were randomly selected from Amhara Regional State. After selecting zones, the research team selected the woredas using random sampling. All FCA pilot implementation woredas in the selected zones were included in the sampling frame. The number of woredas selected from each region corresponded with the number of implementation sites in the respective regions: eight woredas from Amhara and six woredas from Tigray. In the third stage of sampling, schools were selected in consultation with the Zone and Woreda Education Offices. The consultation was made to know about the location of schools and the availability of trained teachers in the schools and thus it did not bias the selection process. In all the selected schools, it was confirmed that there were trained mother-tongue teachers teaching in Grades 1-4 during the assessment period. Then, a total of 56 schools were selected (32 schools from Amhara and 24 schools from Tigray). Table 1 shows the distribution of zones, woredas, and schools selected.

Participants for the assessment were selected based on their position and availability during the assessment period. About 151 MT teachers (31 males and 120 females) and 14 woreda experts were selected for the interview from the list of names of MT teachers who were trained, received FCA materials and participated in the experience sharing workshop. Principals/vice principals (N=52) and cluster supervisors (N=26) of the schools selected were also considered for interview. In addition, 2 mother-tongue teachers who were teaching in Grades 1-4 were selected from each school for classroom observation and a total of 112 mother-tongue teachers were considered for classroom observation.

Table 1: Zones, Woredas and Schools of Intervention and Sample

Regions	Number of Intervention			Proposed Sample		
	Zones	Woredas	Schools	Zones	Woreda	Schools
Tigray	3	3	84	3	6	24
Amhara	8	4	90	4	8	32
Total	11		174	7	14	56

Tools: interview and observation were the tools of data collection. As regards the interview, separate interview protocols were used to gather qualitative data from

teachers, principals, cluster supervisors, mother-tongue teachers, and woreda education office experts. The interview with woreda experts and principals/ supervisors was largely individual. The interview with teachers was both individual as well as group depending on the availability of FCA trained teachers in the schools visited. The interview protocols generally consisted of items that dealt with availability and utilization of the FCA tools and training; their contributions and challenges, opportunities and suggestions for FCA implementation.

The observation checklist was used to gather quantitative data on the frequency of use of the different FCA tools, teachers' activities in assessing learning, record keeping, and giving feedback, conducting follow up, and taking remedial measures.

Data Analysis: The analysis followed both top-down and bottom-up approaches. The top-down approach included fitting data into the themes identified from the study objectives. The bottom-up approach included identifying emerging themes from the data. The first step was trying to integrate similar items/ questions or themes of the interview that were presented in the interview guide to all the groups and identify those that were unique to each group. Nine broad themes were initially identified from the interview protocols and they were then further collapsed into six themes so as to overcome possible overlaps among these themes. Next, transcribed data were reorganized along these six thematic issues. This was followed by further refinement work for text-relevance through scanning the descriptions under each of six themes. So many narratives were identified that did not fit into the heading and, therefore, a reshuffling was made once again either within the existing themes or creating new bigger themes. At this time, some vague descriptions and also descriptions that appeared apparently contradicting in so many ways were excluded. For instance, the same teacher said "It would be ideal if all teachers take the training" and"…if the training was only given to language teachers" (AMT- 14)[4], "The training needs to be given on time" and "If the training be given in summer" (AMT-24**).** Next, attempts were made to identify important codes from narratives under each of the six bigger themes.

Note that all in-text citations given in parenthesis represent codes of interviewees. That is, AMT, AMPS, AMWE, TGT, TGPS, and TGWE are codes used to represent different groups of respondents. The first two letters in each code represent region while T represents mother-tongue teachers, PS represent principals and/or supervisors, and WE represent expert from woreda education office. The number associated with each code represents individual respondent.

Many codes emerged from narratives under each topic. Further attempts were made to synthesize them into sub themes which in the final analysis became sub-headings for organizing and presenting the report.

The research team also analyzed quantitative data gathered through observation checklist using percentages to support and triangulate findings from the qualitative data.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The uses of FCA tools were found to yield very encouraging results and contributions. That is, they were found to be able to positively impact on intentions, and classroom practices in so many ways. The motivations and attitudes of teachers were reported to improve, pedagogical methods were seen becoming more student-friendly and collaborative, assessment practices were felt becoming more diagnostic (progressive, informative and instrumental), record keeping was also becoming professional and systematic, and feed backing also became more supportive, encouraging, and positive. In the same token, student motivations, behaviors, attendance and participation, self-view, and achievements were also reportedly improved. Several instances were noted to cascade the training as well as use of the tools within and adjacent to FCA intervention schools.

With all these significant contributions and achievements, there were, however, equally competing challenges that would threaten level of success at the moment and also possibly cast their shadows on future performance. These challenges began from the very design of the FCA tools and conduct of FCA training and stretch all the way to structural factors, classroom practices, and administrative and supervisory activities. These challenges can be mitigated by properly exploiting opportunities available at all levels: intentions, programs, and strategy provisions at the top (MoE policy level), material, technical and professional support forthcoming from partnering organizations in the middle (non-government and civic societies joining hands in the fight against poor quality basic education) as well as school-level opportunities at the bottom.

The following major recommendations are forwarded based on the findings presented so far:

- Evidences obtained from teachers suggest that the FCA training and tools can assist in managing the early reading problems of school-aged children in the two

regions. Hence, the FCA approach needs to be scaled up to at least at schools and classrooms in these regions. In fact, the possibility of cascading the ideas and approach of FCA to other language groups of first cycle primary schools, as well as upper grades and preschools, need to be seriously thought about.

- Strategy needs to be worked out as to how to integrate the FCA approach to the conventional approach. As regards the training, for example, it has to be worked if it is more feasible to integrate the approach into the existing pre-service teacher training program or in the in-service (i.e. in the teachers' Continuous Professional Development, CPD) program. If it is to be part of the in-service program, should it be a separate entity or needs to be infused into other subject-matter, pedagogical, and assessment courses to make it earn more multiplying effect? If, on the other hand, it is to become part of the CPD, then it needs to be worked out at which stage it needs to be introduced, to whom, and for how long.

- In addition to the strategy of integration, the scope of FCA training also needs to be broadened. That is, it should not be confined only to enabling trainees to understand and practice FCA tools, but it also needs to enable them understand the preparation of FCA tools from locally available materials.

- Education offices need to own FCA intervention to integrate it into their regular work (plans, activities, budget, supervision, and reporting). FCA training needs to be offered to these officers to expedite this process. Supervision formats also need to incorporate the components of FCA.

- Organizing experience sharing programs in the cluster schools would also help deepening, cascading, and sustaining FCA in a more cost-effective manner.

- There is a need to revise the design problems of the FCA tools including the graphics, editorials, relevance of some of the materials employed.

- Class size has been repeatedly mentioned as a source of serious concern and threat for implementing FCA. Hence, mechanisms need to be sought to minimize work load for teachers so that FCA can be fully and effectively implemented. In fact, establishing a school level FCA task force/ committee would, as it was also suggested by participants, help in monitoring the approach until FCA gets very well integrated into school practices and routines.

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Effect of Life skills Training on New Entrant Female students in three Universities in Ethiopia

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Abstract: *University students who are efficient in life skills will acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to succeed in their university education and beyond. The overall goal of life skill trainings was to see retention and completion of university education of female students in the sampled universities. The main focus of the intervention was to enhance students' life skills in eleven variables: Self-esteem, Communication Skills, Study Skills, Stress Management, Substance Abuse, Women's/ girls right, Reproductive Health, HIV, Leadership Skill, Job, profession and Career and Mentorship. The objectives of the intervention project were to achieve these goals through improving capacity of female students to succeed in university and through improving capacity of partner universities to support female students. As a result, before life skill training was launched, pre training assessment was conducted in the sampled three universities, sampling a total of 750 female students (250 from each), and then post training assessment was carried out at the end of the training program, only for 494 female students. The training was conducted using university instructors as trainers. The assessment was designed to be a single group comparison of pre-training baseline vs. post- training changes. The quantitative data was used to compare the pre-training assessment with post-training assessment, to measure the achieved results of the life skills of the female students with the eleven variables. The qualitative data were used to independently describe the changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of female university students and was directly used to complement the quantitative data. The cumulative result shows that the Life skills training have brought significant changes in the life skills of the sampled female students. Students' dropout and dismissal will be reduced; retention and graduation rate will be increased.*

Key terms: life skills, female students, assessment, training, self-esteem

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