



A profile of an evaluation and assessment agency: Saudi Arabia's Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC)

This paper presents a profile of the agency responsible for education evaluation and assessment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC). It draws on research conducted by the OECD as part of a three-year project to develop the technical capacity of ETEC and benchmark its policies and practices with those of similar agencies in OECD countries. The paper describes ETEC's mission and structure (Section 1); its remit, activities and instruments (Section 2); and the resources it has to fulfil its mandate (Section 3). In doing so, the paper traces the Commission's trajectory from its establishment to the present day. It aims to be of interest to education policymakers and researchers in OECD and partner countries, providing information on both the Saudi education system and evaluation and assessment agencies internationally – topics that have received relatively little attention in education literature.

Section 1. ETEC's mission and structure

Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is undertaking far-reaching reforms to improve its education system

Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an unprecedented cross-sectoral reform agenda known as Vision 2030. The goal of Vision 2030 is to reduce the country's dependence on fossil fuels and create a dynamic and sustainable economy. To achieve these ambitions, Saudi Arabia has introduced several programmes including the *Human Capability Development Program* (launched in 2021), which aims to improve the country's education and training system to create a highly-skilled population that can meet the demands of a knowledge-based labour market (OECD, 2020^[1]; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.^[2]). Vision 2030 has triggered a range of far-reaching reforms that have brought changes not just to Saudi Arabia's education policies, but also to the Kingdom's institutional landscape. The establishment and institutionalisation of the Saudi evaluation and assessment agency was a critical component of this agenda (see Box 1 for an overview of its evolution). It also indicates Saudi Arabia's strong focus on evaluation and assessment to drive progress in education and skills and, in turn, support economic growth. The emphasis

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on evaluation and assessment to promote improvement in the education sector is also common internationally. At present, nearly all OECD countries have specialised institutions responsible for one or more of the different aspects of education evaluation and assessment.

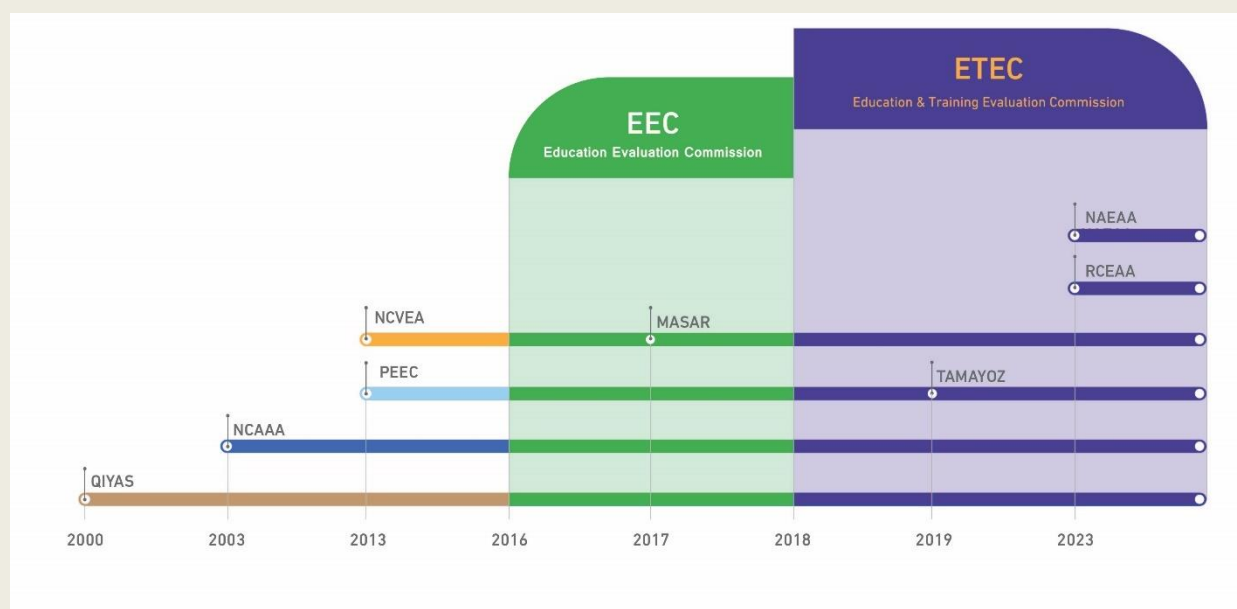
Box 1. The evolution of Saudi Arabia’s education evaluation and assessment agency

In 2013, Saudi Arabia established two entities to evaluate and monitor the quality of the education system: the Public Education Evaluation Commission (PEEC) and the National Centre for Vocational Evaluation and Accreditation (NCVEA). PEEC was tasked with developing instruments to measure the quality of teaching and learning in the pre-tertiary education sector, and the NCVEA focused on the evaluation and accreditation of vocational education. These new entities came to complement the existing National Centre for Assessment (Qiyas), founded in 2000 to conduct national assessments and evaluations; and the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA), established in 2003, to evaluate and accredit institutions and programmes of tertiary non-vocational education (see Figure 1).

In 2016, the four entities were consolidated into the **Education Evaluation Commission (EEC)**, which oversaw the entire education and training system. Their integration mirrored a significant institutional shift introduced by Vision 2030 when the responsibilities of school education and higher education were assigned to a single ministry, the Ministry of Education. In 2018, EEC became the **Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC)**. Operationally and substantially, little changed in this process. However, the renaming made it clear that the agency’s responsibilities now covered education *and* training.

In addition to the aforementioned entities, ETEC is now also made up of the Research Centre for Evaluation, Assessment, and Accreditation (RCEAA) and the National Academy for Evaluation Assessment and Accreditation (NAEAA), which were both established in 2023.

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia’s evaluation centres and agencies between 2000-23



Source: figure prepared by ETEC

ETEC is an independent government agency comprised of specialised centres

ETEC has financial and administrative independence and reports directly to the Saudi Council of Ministers. The independence of evaluation and assessment institutions vis-à-vis authorities responsible for education and skills policy and delivery is a defining feature of similar bodies in OECD countries. It ensures that evaluation and assessment entities are able to make judgements that draw primarily on technical knowledge and evidence, and are shielded from political and/or personal interference (Golden, 2020^[3]; OECD, 2013^[4]).

Today, ETEC is made up of six main entities:

- The National Centre for Assessment (also known as Qiyas) develops assessments and examinations for students and teachers;
- The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA) assures, evaluates, and accredits tertiary education institutions (TEIs) and programmes;
- The National Centre for School Evaluation and Excellence (also known as Tamayoz and the successor of PEEC) is responsible for evaluating and accrediting schools, as well as assessing how schools implement curriculum standards;
- The National Centre for Training Evaluation and Accreditation (also known as Masar and the successor of the NCVEA) evaluates and accredits Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions and programmes, and licenses trainers;
- The Research Centre for Evaluation, Assessment and Accreditation (RCEAA) conducts research based on the assessment data collected by other centres and shares findings with other ETEC centres, policymakers and practitioners;
- The National Academy for Evaluation, Assessment and Accreditation (NAEAA) equips, trains, and certifies evaluation experts.

ETEC is seeking ways to optimise its federal structure

The fact that ETEC was built from the bottom up, through the integration of established institutions, means that the Commission today concentrates considerable evaluation expertise – both in terms of specialised staff, and in terms of technical resources (e.g. advanced security systems, training facilities and data platforms) (Al-Qataee et al., 2020^[5]). Because most of ETEC’s centres were previously separate bodies or departments, they have also retained a high degree of technical and operational independence from each other while operating under the ETEC umbrella. For example, communication between TEIs and NCAAA is direct, without interference from ETEC’s leadership.

ETEC’s leadership is focused on optimising this federal structure by:

- developing data sharing systems;
- encouraging consistent and aligned working methods and outputs. For example, the RCEAA helps the various centres design assessment frameworks that are aligned;
- connecting activities being undertaken across the different centres. For example, results from the new national assessment (designed and administered by Qiyas based on a framework that had been previously developed by Tamayoz) will inform school evaluations (conceptualised by Tamayoz and carried out by evaluation specialists that NAEAA certifies) and research (conducted by the RCEAA); and,

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- setting a strategic plan that gives a shared direction to the work of the Commission and, importantly, brings the different entities together to deliver on top priorities for the Kingdom.

Section 2. ETEC’s remit, activities and instruments

ETEC has a broad remit for evaluation and assessment

ETEC is responsible for assuring and controlling quality across both the private and public education and training sectors. It covers all levels, from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to TVET, with particular focus on school and tertiary education. Within this remit, ETEC is responsible for a range of activities, including:

- the design and implementation of quality standards – such as the school evaluation framework, teacher and principal professional standards, and curriculum standards;
- the design and implementation of tests – such as teacher certification exams, national student assessments, university-entrance exams, and international student assessments;
- the certification of school evaluation specialists and academic accreditation reviewers (in other systems these professionals are commonly referred to as “inspectors” and “quality reviewers”);
- the evaluation and accreditation of education and training institutions and programmes – such as school evaluation; university and TVET evaluation and accreditation; and,
- increasingly, research and analysis – such as the State of Education Report, national reports on Saudi Arabia’s performance in international assessments, and reports summarising the results from teacher certification exams.

Annex A provides an overview of the work of evaluation agencies in a set of benchmark countries. There is considerable variation in the range of agencies’ responsibilities, reflecting their history and the context in which they operate.

The role of ETEC in setting learning standards is noteworthy although not uncommon internationally. Integrating the management of assessment and learning and/or curriculum standards within the same agency allows for greater alignment and consistency in how the curriculum is developed, implemented and assessed. For this reason, many OECD countries have made a single agency responsible for curriculum and assessment policy (e.g. the Korean Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE), the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) or the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCAA) in Ireland).

ETEC’s evaluation instruments offer a comprehensive view of education performance

Table 1 presents ETEC’s main evaluation and assessment instruments. ETEC (and its predecessors) has taken important steps to align its practices more closely with those found in countries with mature evaluation systems by:

- rolling out national standardised assessments (see Box 2) to provide a more accurate picture of students’ learning outcomes and track progress over time;
- introducing different tools, such as classroom observation, to collect information on teaching and learning practices and processes;
- widening participation in evaluation and assessment instruments to provide greater accountability - for example, by requiring all schools to participate in Saudi Arabia’s new national assessment and to undertake external evaluation;
- transitioning towards computerised evaluations and multi-stage computer adaptive testing to raise efficiency and ensure a more precise measurement of students’ ability;

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- collecting stakeholder input as part of evaluation processes to reflect different perspectives on quality - for example, as part of TEI’s continuous assessment, employers are asked to evaluate the skills of university graduates.

Table 1. ETEC’s evaluation and assessment instruments

Domain	ETECs data collection and evaluation instruments	Topics and focus of the information	How is the data collected	Who collects the data	How often is this data collected
School evaluation and accreditation	School self-evaluation	School performance in terms of school management, teaching and learning practices, learning outcomes and school environment.	Schools input information into self-evaluation digital platform using data collected through questionnaires, classroom and school observation, stakeholder interviews, etc.	Self-reported by the school	1 year
	External school evaluation		Desk-based research (e.g. self-evaluation reports, data from national assessment) and a 3-day school visit (which includes interviews, classroom observation, document analysis, and surveys for students, parents, teachers, and principals).	Team of evaluators (made up of individuals external to the school)	3 years
	School accreditation		Review of the school's external evaluation report, desk-based research, and school visit.	Team of evaluators (made up of individuals external to the school)	Optional for private and international schools (and public schools do not undertake accreditation). Every 2 years for schools with conditional accreditation, and every 5 years for schools with full accreditation.
Teacher certification	Teacher certification exams	One exam focuses on subject knowledge, and the other focuses on teacher’s values and responsibilities, as well as their professional and practical knowledge.	Multiple-choice exams.	ETEC	The certificate is valid for 5 years. Renewal procedures are still being developed.
Student assessment and evaluation	National Assessment for Schools (NAFS) tests	Grade 3: reading and mathematics. Grades 6 and 9: reading, mathematics and science.	Paper and computerised tests.	ETEC	Every year
	General Aptitude Test (GAT)	Numeracy and literacy.	Paper and computerised tests.	ETEC	The computerised version of the test is available throughout the year, and the paper-based version is available twice a year.
	Scholastic Achievement Admission Test (SAAT)	Knowledge of upper secondary core subjects (Science / Humanities)	Paper and computerised tests.	ETEC	Twice a year.

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	Assessment of tertiary education graduates (<i>Jaheziya</i>)	Assess TEI graduates’ learning outcomes and their readiness to enter the labour market. Currently covers 24 majors and will be extended to cover all majors.	Computerised test.	ETEC	Every year
Tertiary accreditation and evaluation	Institutional and programme accreditation	Institutional mission, vision, and strategic planning; governance, leadership, and management; teaching and learning; students; faculty and staff; institutional resources; research and innovation; and community partnership.	Review of TEI’s plans and documents and a 4-day site visit (that includes interviews, facility visits, and further document review).	Team of evaluators made up of individuals external to the institution	Every 4 years for universities with conditional accreditation and 7 years for universities with full accreditation
	Institutional and programme continuous assessment		Surveys and statistical data.	Self-evaluation	Every year

Through combining evidence collected by other actors, and notably the Ministry of Education, ETEC’s instruments provide a comprehensive view of education quality that is meant to inform policies and practices. For example, ETEC’s teacher certification exams offer, among other things, information about the competences of teachers and teacher graduates that can be used to strengthen initial teacher education and in-service training. At the same time, the National Assessment for Schools (NAFS) will offer evidence on student performance that can be used to target resources to underperforming schools

Box 2. The evolution of Saudi Arabia’s national standardised assessments

Saudi Arabia has had different national standardised assessments over the years (see Table 2):

- In 2015, PEEC ran a sample-based assessment of mathematic and science in Grades 3 and 6. The assessments were halted in 2016-17, due to the restructuring of the commission.
- In 2018, ETEC created another sample-based assessment – the National Assessment Programme (NAP) - to monitor student achievement nationally. It was implemented over two years, 2018 for mathematics and science, and 2019 for reading, both at grades 4 and 8.
- In 2022, under the National Assessment for Schools (NAFS) programme, ETEC introduced a new test commonly known as the NAFS tests. The NAFS tests cover mathematics, science and reading in Grades 3, 6 and 9. Unlike previous assessments, NAFS tests are a census-based assessment, which means that they generate information that can support not only system monitoring but also school accountability. The NAFS tests’ scope is similar to what is found in many OECD countries and aligned with the OECD’s 2020 review recommendations. Another important development is that NAFS is offered in digital format; across OECD and partner countries, most national evaluations are digitised or in the process of being so (OECD, 2023^[6]).

Table 2. Student assessments in school education

	National student assessment	NAP	NAFS
In place	2015-17	2018-2019	From 2022
Grades	Grades 3 and 6	Grades 4 and 8	Grades 3, 6 and 9

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Reference document	Based on textbook content	Based on the National Curriculum Standards	Based on the National Curriculum Standards
Sampling	Sample of schools	Sample schools and students “based on criteria set by the test operators” and deemed to be representative of all the Kingdom’s schools and students	2022: a sample of students from all schools in grades 6 and 9. For grade 3, it covered a sample of schools. 2023: For Grade 3: sample of schools annually and census over a round of three years. For Grades 6 and 9: census based.
Subjects	Mathematics and science	Reading, mathematics, science (subjects rotate).	For Grade 3: literacy and numeracy. For Grades 6 and 9: reading, mathematics and science.
Delivery	Paper and pencil	Paper and pencil	Paper and pencil. ETEC is piloting the digital version of the test.
Results	Do not impact students’ studies. It was meant to support school accountability and improvement	Do not impact students’ studies. Test reports contain statistics, data analysis, recommendations. Reports reflect performance level of regions. Reports have different target audiences including: MoE, school leaders, teachers, and media. There is also a technical report.	Do not impact students’ studies. It is meant to support school accountability and improvement. Accompanied by dashboards on the performance. Research and analytics. Reports have different target audiences including: the MoE, Education Directorates and schools; as well as the media. There is also a technical report.

Source: (OECD, 2020^[11]), Education in Saudi Arabia, Reviews of National Policies for Education, OECD Publishing, OECD, <https://doi.org/10.1787/76df15a2-en>;

ETEC manages Saudi Arabia's international surveys and engages in extensive international benchmarking

As mentioned above, ETEC also coordinates Saudi Arabia’s participation in international surveys, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and more recently the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (see Table 3).

Since joining these surveys, ETEC has been integrating what they have learnt from collaborating with international partners on effective assessment design. For example, as discussed above, ETEC has moved to computer-based testing, which is a common feature of international student assessments. The COVID-19 crisis accelerated this process; in order to allow students to complete their studies and apply for tertiary education institutions, ETEC used online testing and virtual proctoring in SAAT in 2019 (Al-Qataee et al., 2020^[51]). Despite some initial difficulties related to access and safety, “the results to date suggest a successful implementation without loss of fairness, reliability, or quality” (ibid). Moreover, transitioning to computer-based testing can help maximise efficiency and minimise costs.

Table 3. Saudi Arabia’s participation in international surveys

Agency	Survey	Focus	Participation in the following cycles
OECD	TALIS	Survey of teachers and school leaders (ISCED 0, 1, 2 and 3)	2018, 2024
	PISA	Assessment of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science	2018, 2022
The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)	TIMSS	Assessment of students in grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and science	2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, 2023
	PIRLS	Assessment of students in grade 4 in reading	2011, 2016, 2021

Despite relying on international benchmarking, ETEC has been careful to adapt new practices and methods to Saudi priorities and context. ETEC’s approach to school evaluation is a good example of this. In accordance with international trends, ETEC emphasised schools’ self-evaluation as a way to encourage school-led improvement. Nevertheless, recognising that the Saudi school sector would also require external pressure to drive progress, ETEC also chose to keep a strong focus on external evaluation.

ETEC is putting more information in the public domain, while targeting different user needs

Alongside other organisations in Saudi Arabia, ETEC is increasing its efforts to disseminate data and evidence on education performance and has plans to make more information collected accessible to the public (see Table 4). The *Mustaqbalhum*, for example, is a smartphone application that allows parents to access their child(ren)’s test results, as well as evaluation results from their child(ren)’s school.

ETEC is particularly focused on improving data accessibility by releasing data in more user-friendly formats. ETEC prepares summary reports of education and training institutions’ evaluation results, infographics of Saudi Arabia’s performance in international assessments, and dashboards with comparative information on school performance. ETEC has also created a number of rankings and performance indices that rate the performance of education institutions or particular sectors (e.g. TVET, tertiary education). For example, ETEC calculates an index of school’s performance, Tarteeb, based on schools’ average GAT and SAAT scores. While such rankings have limitations and carry risks, especially if stakes are attached, they can focus public attention on questions of educational quality and generate impetus for change.

Outside of these public communication efforts, ETEC has organised closed workshops with local education offices to communicate regional results from evaluation and assessment instruments, and provides the full evaluation reports to a limited group of stakeholders, such as the school or university.

Differentiating reporting strategies according to the user, and to whether information is published publicly versus relayed privately, is common across OECD and partner countries. It helps to ensure that stakeholders know how to interpret and use the data. Such a compromise also builds trust; it allows for stakeholders to be honest in their assessments without having to share these details with the world, while policymakers, parents and students receive enough information to hold the school accountable for their general performance.

Table 4. ETEC’s main methods of disseminating information from its assessments and evaluations

Format	Description of output	Information it disseminates	Purpose	Audience
Reports	State of Education and Training	Results of system level indicators of performance	Monitoring the performance of the education and training ecosystem	Relevant government officials; will be made public but is not available yet
	Student performance report	Results of students’ performance in national and international large-scale assessments	Informing stakeholders about the quality of the system	Public
	School performance report	School evaluation results	Informing stakeholders about the quality of schools	Relevant government officials; will be made public but is not available yet
	The status of TVET accreditation	TVET accreditation results	Informing stakeholders about the quality of TVET institutions	Relevant government officials; will be made public but is not available yet
	The status of higher education accreditation	University accreditation results	Informing the public, institutions, and government authorities	Relevant government officials; will be made public but is not available yet
	Reports on Saudi Arabia’s participation in international surveys	Saudi Arabia’s participation and results in PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, and TALIS	Informing stakeholders	Public
	Report on teacher licensing exams	Results of performance of teaching candidates and in-service teachers. Summarised at the institutional level as well as the regional and national levels	Informing stakeholders	Relevant government officials; will be made public but is not available yet
Rankings	Saudi University Ranking	Ranking of universities based on a defined set of indicators	Informing students and other stakeholders	Public (not fully available until 2025)
	<i>Tarteeb</i> Index	Ranks schools, education offices and education directorates according to students’ scores on GAT and SAAT averaged at the school level	Motivating competition to improve performance and informing parental school selection	Public
Workshops	Meetings with stakeholders to discuss results of evaluations	Results from national and international assessments, school evaluation, TVET accreditation, etc	Informing policy decisions	Relevant government agencies
Infographics and dashboards	Performance Card	Concise information about the evaluation results of entities (schools, offices, directorates, universities, TVET institutions, etc)	Informing stakeholders	Relevant government officials
	Interactive dashboards	Results of examinations, school evaluation, and higher education and TVET institutions accreditation	Informing government officials and eventually the wider community	Relevant government officials; will be made public, but it is not yet available
Apps	<i>Mustaqbalhum</i>	Student test results, and results of the evaluations of the student’s school, accompanied by advisory information (including research evidence about effective learning practices and career paths)	Informing parents	Available for parents who sign up

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ETEC has a special unit conducting research and analysis

ETEC has a specific unit – the Research Centre for Evaluation Assessment and Accreditation (RCEAA) – which is responsible for research and analysis. This centre validates primary analyses conducted in other ETEC centres and undertakes secondary analysis of Saudi Arabia’s international and national assessment results. The RCEAA research targets technical issues (e.g. assessment methodology) to ensure ETEC centres are able to operate with quality assessment frameworks. It is also common for evaluation and assessment agencies to undertake and disseminate policy-relevant research (e.g. ex-ante or ex-post evaluations of government policy interventions), which RCEAA plans to focus on in the future.

Section 3. ETEC’s resourcing policies and practices

A significant part of ETEC’s resources comes from its fee-paying services

ETEC relies on resources raised through its fee-paying services¹ (e.g. charging fees from university accreditation) to cover its expenditures. At present, the greatest part of ETEC’s revenue is raised independently, and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic ETEC relied almost fully on self-raised funds. ETEC taps into the Ministry of Finance’s resources when it is unable to reach its funding requirements with its own resources, or to fund ad-hoc projects assigned to the Commission.

It is quite common internationally for evaluation agencies to raise resources independently (see selected examples in Box 3). A reliance on independently raised resources can introduce efficiencies. For example, it can encourage evaluation agencies to become more customer-oriented and make processes more straightforward (e.g. simplifying data submission processes). However, fee-based systems can make planning more difficult. They also require safeguards to ensure responsiveness to demand does not affect the independence of the evaluation process. For example, as is common internationally among government bodies, ETEC is regularly audited by the Ministry of Finance.

Box 3. How evaluation and assessment agencies are funded

The Measurement, Placement and Selection Centre (ÖSYM), Türkiye

ÖSYM’s budget is entirely dependent on the examination fees it collects, which makes the centre financially and administratively autonomous. The ÖSYM’s Board of Directors determines the fees charged for its services.

Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), England (United Kingdom)

Ofsted is funded primarily through allocations from the Department for Education (DfE). However, the agency also raises funds itself, mainly through the registration and annual fees it collects from ECEC providers and independent schools. In addition, Ofsted charges government departments for specific activities (e.g. inspecting education and training programmes in prisons). In 2021-22, the income Ofsted had raised independently amounted to approximately 23% of its gross budget. The importance of independently raised funds relative to the total budget has been increasing and Ofsted’s projections suggest that this increase will continue in years to come.

¹ ETEC does not charge fees for all services it provides.

National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP), Brazil

INEP is also funded partially through independently raised funds. In 2022, approximately 80% of the agency’s budget was funded through administrative and service fees the agency collected [e.g. registration fees for evaluations such as the National Examination of Upper Secondary (ENEM)]. Only 20% of INEP’s budget was funded by government.

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), Finland

FINEEC is funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture and is free to decide its funding priorities and allocate resources accordingly. Although FINEEC is mainly government-funded, the agency also raises some of its income through fee-paying services, which include programme evaluations in the field of technology; cross-border quality assurance projects; and audits of tertiary education institutions.

Source: Turkish Court of Account (2021^[7]), (2021^[7]), ÖLÇME, SEÇME VE YERLEŞTİRME MERKEZİ BAŞKANLIĞI [ÖSYM Presidency: Turkish Court of Accounts Audit Report 2020], <https://www.savistay.gov.tr/reports/download/3599-olcme-secme-ve-yerlestirme-merkezi-baska>; Ofsted (2019^[8]), *Ofsted Main Estimate 2019-20: Estimates Memorandum*, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/education/estimates-memoranda/ofsted-main-estimates-2019-20-memorandum.pdf>; Ofsted (2022^[9]), *Annual Report and Accounts 2021-2022*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1090199/31252_ofsted_annual_report_and_accounts_2021-22_print.pdf; The Brazilian Office of the Comptroller General (2023^[10]), (2023^[10]), *Portal da Transparência [Transparency Portal]*, <https://portal.datransparencia.gov.br/> (accessed on 19 January 2023); Loukkola et al. (2017^[11]), *ENQA Agency Review: Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)* https://backend.deqar.eu/reports/EQAR/FINEEC_External_Review_Report_2017.pdf; Maguire et al. (2022^[12]) *ENQA Agency Review: Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)*, <https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/FINEEC-external-review-report.pdf>.

ETEC is responsible for determining its resource needs, under the oversight of the Ministry of Finance

ETEC’s strategic planning and financial departments determine the agency’s annual resourcing needs. This is done in consultation with different teams and guided by ETEC’s Strategic Plan and Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030. ETEC has some freedom to reallocate spending within an expenditure category (e.g. staff salaries, facilities, or programmes). However, the Commission has much less flexibility when reallocating resources across categories. To ensure that ETEC is respecting such requirements and following the financial planning, the Ministry of Finance monitors the Commission’s expenditure. Digital databases allow the Ministry of Finance auditors to monitor in “real time.”

Saudi Arabia’s approach to funding and monitoring government agencies has evolved over the years and it is now closer to those found across the OECD. For example, it is common internationally for line ministries and other government agencies to determine their own resourcing needs, and to link funding requirements to national strategic objectives. This is widely acknowledged to be good practice, primarily because, by virtue of being closer to daily operations, sector specific bodies are better able to assess resource requirements than the centre of government. Their engagement in the budgeting process also helps build their financial capacity, and to strengthen accountability in the system. It is also common internationally for central authorities to impose conditions on and monitor line ministries’ and government agencies’ spending.

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ETEC is increasingly setting priorities for its work, aligned with the Kingdom’s ambitious vision for the education sector

Recognising the need to use resources efficiently, ETEC’s Strategic Plan 2023-2027 sets clear priorities for the agency. The Strategic Plan prioritises initiatives considered to be high impact and medium to high feasibility; those with lower impact and lower feasibility are meant to be taken forward only if the former have been achieved (ETEC, 2022^[13]). Focusing the agency’s limited resources on a selected number of initiatives can strengthen their design and implementation, and “increase the momentum” of Saudi Arabia’s education reforms (Ibid).

ETEC relies on a core team of internal staff and a network of external experts

Like most evaluation agencies internationally, ETEC relies on both internal and external experts. ETEC’s internal staff tend to be highly specialised. Over the years, ETEC’s leadership has focused primarily on hiring individuals with expertise and experience in assessment and statistical analysis (e.g. psychometricians, statisticians, and econometricians). ETEC also supports staff’s continuous training, focusing on key skills for the organisation, in particular digital and statistical skills and evaluation methodology.

ETEC’s internal capacity is complemented with external expertise. For example, employs a cadre of freelance inspectors and reviewers. Importantly, ETEC aims to balance national and international professionals to ensure a mix of international and Saudi perspective in the evaluations. The agency also requests policy and technical advice from international organisations, including the World Bank and the OECD, as well as private consulting firms on a range of issues (e.g. data information systems and assessment instruments).

The advantages of engaging external experts are many: it allows the evaluation agency to remain relatively nimble and flexible; it offers opportunities for the agency to draw on specialised skill sets for discreet tasks; it is also often more cost-efficient for the agency to contract out certain services. However, working with external expertise brings new risks. Notably, the evaluation agency might have less control over some outcomes. Box 4 discusses other evaluation agencies that draw on external expertise to carry out their work, and the strategies they have developed to manage the risks involved.

Box 4. Managing partnerships with private testing and assessment companies

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), United States

For over 40 years, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the United States has partnered with Educational Testing Service (ETS), a leading educational testing and measurement organisation, to deliver the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP). ETS is responsible for developing the content of the assessment as well as analysing and reporting NAEP results.

NCES also partners with private testing companies to support the implementation of PISA in the United States. Pearson and Westat, for example, were the United States’ National Contractors of PISA in 2018, and were responsible for sample selection, data collection, reporting results, and hiring, training, and supervising test administrators.

The National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), Brazil

INEP in Brazil also partners with private companies to design, develop, implement and correct national and international assessments. For example, from 2017 to 2022, the private company, Fundação Cesgranrio was responsible for implementing and correcting Brazil’s tertiary-entrance examination.

Strategies that NCES and INEP have taken to manage partnerships with the private sector

- **Hiring highly technical staff** able to review the proposals delivered by private testing companies and oversee the work they undertake.
- **Undertaking call for tenders based on rigorous standards and clear terms of reference**, which encourage both competition and transparency in the system. For example, NCES has a competency-based procurement process. NCES published a Framework Development Policy for NAEP which lays out the process of engaging with a contractor, and the standards to which contractors are expected to adhere.
- **Establishing medium-term contracts and aiming for a certain degree of continuity**. For example, the contracts between NCES, INEP and selected contractors are usually for a period of 4 to 5 years, and evaluation agencies often work with the same partners across multiple test cycles. This grants greater stability to all stakeholders, and supports longer-term planning.
- **Diversifying contractors**. Evaluation and assessment agencies often collaborate with many external entities to develop and implement large-scale national and international assessments. For example, NCES works with over 10 contractors on its national assessment and each contractor is responsible for a different aspect of NAEP (e.g. sampling, data collection, preparation, packaging, and distribution of assessment material). This approach not only allows NCES to work with specialised private companies which are experts in a specific field and/or task, but also minimises the risks that come with relying on a single partner.
- **Publishing a complete list of its current and past contractors**, specifying the type of contract undertaken with each private company, for increased transparency.
- **Having strong audit and compliance mechanisms in place**. Both the United States and Brazil have well-established audit and compliance mechanisms, which help prevent, identify and manage issues of conflicting public and private interests.
- **Involving other government agencies to help with the design and implementation of assessments**. For example, INEP co-operates and co-ordinates with other government agencies (e.g. post office, police) to administer the ENEM.

Source: ETS (2022^[14]), *ETS K–12 Student Assessment Programs*, <https://www.ets.org/k12/collaborations/naep.html> (accessed on 16 January 2023); NCES (2020^[15]), *Support to NAEP*, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/support.aspx> (accessed on 6 February 2023); Orr (2021^[16]), *History, Policy, and Decision Points: Developing NAEP Assessment Frameworks*, <https://www.nagb.gov/content/dam/nagb/en/documents/publications/frameworks/History-of-NAEP-Frameworks-Report-Final.pdf>; INEP (2022^[17]), *Inep abre licitação para aplicação do Enem [INEP opens bid for application of ENEM]*, <https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/enem/inep-abre-licitacao-para-aplicacao-do-enem> (accessed on 17 February 2023).

ETEC has an ambitious approach to digitisation

ETEC is drawing on digital technologies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its evaluation and assessment activities. For example, ETEC introduced digital platforms to support school evaluation. Education institutions and evaluators access information and upload documents through these platforms. This helps reduce administrative burden and limit some costs with the reporting process, allowing them to focus their energy on the actual evaluation.

ETEC’s leadership is also exploring the potential of smart technologies based on artificial intelligence, robotics, big data and learning analytics, to support evaluation and assessment in the medium to long run.

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For example, after the first cycle of school evaluation is completed, ETEC plans to introduce a risk-based approach to school evaluation, which would use an algorithm to draw on a range of quantitative and qualitative data to identify schools at risk of underperformance. This approach can generate efficiencies, for instance, by reducing the number of evaluations carried out as well as the time and energy high-performing schools spend with the external evaluation process. Moreover, it can also ensure that ETEC’s monitoring and follow up efforts are targeted at those that need them the most.

The bottom line:

Like evaluation agencies in OECD and partner countries, ETEC is an asset for Saudi Arabia’s education system and reform plans. The Commission provides information that can help to improve policy design and implementation, monitor progress towards key government objectives, identify bottlenecks and target resources and support more effectively.

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Annex A. Evaluation and assessment agencies’ remit in selected countries and economies

Country	Name of the evaluation agency(ies)	Education levels				Activities			
		ECEC	Schools	Tertiary education	TVET	Establishing quality standards	Designing and implementing evaluations and assessments	Research and analysis	Reporting
Brazil	National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP)	x	X	X	X	Develops quality performance indicators (e.g. the General Course Index that assesses tertiary education institutions)	Conducts national student assessments [e.g. Basic Education Assessment System (Saeb)] and examinations [e.g. National High School Exam (Enem)]	Collects and disseminates information and statistics on the education system	Reports and disseminates data to the general public, media, and policymakers
Emirate of Dubai (United Arab Emirates, UAE)	Education and Human Resources Council (EHRC)		X	X	X	Revises learning standards and the curriculum framework across education cycles	Monitors the education system	Conducts research and analyses data to understand education and employment trends	N/A
	Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), and its subsidiary body: the Dubai Schools Inspections Bureau (DSIB)	x	x	x		Defines requirements and standards for high-quality educational provision	Licenses and inspects private schools and institutions, accredits and authenticates certificates issued by such Schools, conducts surveys of staff and students	Produces reports (e.g. school inspection) and conducts thematic analysis	Reports and disseminates results (from e.g. school inspection, international assessments, surveys), disseminates best practices
Estonia	Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA)		X	X	X	Develops and establishes the principles of quality assessment in education	Assesses quality of general and vocational education	Manages accreditation and quality assessment databases, conducts surveys, thematic reviews and pilot evaluations	Reports and disseminates the best quality assurance practices in cooperation with educational institutions and other partners
Finland	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)	X	X	X	X	N/A	Implements national student assessments, thematic and system	N/A	Reports findings of its activities and develops recommendations for local, regional,

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Country	Name of the evaluation agency(ies)	Education levels				Activities			
		ECEC	Schools	Tertiary education	TVET	Establishing quality standards	Designing and implementing evaluations and assessments	Research and analysis	Reporting
							evaluations, and evaluations of quality systems (e.g. audits of tertiary education institutions)		and national decision-makers
Kazakhstan	National Testing Centre		X	X		Develops and manages assessments and exams of students and teaching staff	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Quality Control Committee		X			Sets and carries out quality control policies in education and science	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Information Analytic Centre		X			N/A	Carries out system evaluations	Conducts independent research and studies on the education system (e.g. Report on the State and Development of the Education System)	N/A
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Education Training and Evaluation Commission (ETEC)	X	X	X	X	Develops a national framework for qualifications and curriculum standards	Evaluates, reviews and accredits educational and training institutions (e.g. tests for students and education and training practitioners, process for assessing institutions)	Conducts research and analysis on evaluation, measurement, and accreditation	Reports evaluation results to raise the quality of education and training and enhance their contribution to the economy and national development.
Korea	Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE)		X			Develops teaching and learning standards	Devises and distributes evaluation tools	Conducts research on, teaching, assessment, curriculum design and implementation	N/A
United Kingdom	Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) (England)	X	X	X ²	X	Establishes quality standards for childcare services, schools, and academies	Inspects and regulates organisations and individuals providing education, training, and care (e.g. childminders, schools)	Conducts and commissions research relating to early years and education, further education, and social care	Reports school evaluation results directly to the parliament, parents, carers and commissioners

² Inspects only initial teacher training and teacher development.

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Country	Name of the evaluation agency(ies)	Education levels				Activities			
		ECEC	Schools	Tertiary education	TVET	Establishing quality standards	Designing and implementing evaluations and assessments	Research and analysis	Reporting
	The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) (England)		X	X		Regulates exams and qualifications	N/A	Conducts research on qualifications, curriculum and assessment design and implementation	Publishes data and statistics on the qualifications, examinations and assessment system
	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (Northern Ireland)	X	X		X	Acts as qualifications regulator on behalf of the Department of Education and Department for the Economy	Delivers assessment arrangements for primary and post-primary schools, accredits a range of qualifications	Provides research and advice to government	Publishes and disseminates information relating to the curriculum, assessment and examinations
	Education Scotland (Scotland)	X	X			Develops and implements standards for school evaluation and curriculum	Carries out school evaluations	Conducts research on school evaluation, curriculum design and implementation	Reports school evaluation results
	Estyn (Wales)	X	X		X	Establishes standards for school quality	Evaluates schools	N/A	Reports school evaluation results
United States	National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)	X	X	X	X	N/A	Oversees and administers the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)	Collects, collates, and analyses data	Reports and disseminates complete statistics on the education system
	National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE)	X	X	X	X	N/A	Conducts, large-scale evaluations of education programs supported by federal funds	Designs and supports evaluation studies on the effectiveness of education programmes and practices	Disseminate information on scientifically valid research, statistics, and evaluation in education

Source: Adapted from OECD (2013^[4]), *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/22230955> and the official websites of the evaluation agencies.