



LEARNING WHAT MATTERS IN MALAWI

FROM POLICY TO HOLISTIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ACRONYMS

CDSS	Community Day Secondary School
CRECCOM	Creative Centre for Community Mobilization
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CUE	Center for Universal Education
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
KII	Key Informant Interview
MUBAS	Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology
MSCE	Malawi School Certificate of Education
NEET	Not in education, employment, or training
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
SSCAR	Secondary School Curriculum and Assessment Review
TEVET	Technical, Entrepreneurial, and Vocational Education and Training Authority

ABOUT CREATIVE CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION (CRECCOM)

CRECCOM is a renowned, nationally operating Malawian non-governmental organization (NGO) headquartered in Zomba City in the Southern Region of Malawi with over 30 years of experience in social empowerment and community mobilization. The organization grew out of two USAID-funded projects: the Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education Social Mobilization project, which ran from 1994 to 1998, and the pilot phase of the Social Mobilization Campaign for Educational Quality (SMC EQ Project), which concluded in

1999. These projects were contracted to Creative Associates International Incorporated, a Washington D.C.-based company, but were implemented in Malawi by the same staff who would go on to establish CRECCOM. CRECCOM is a member of the Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST). The principal authors of this report are members of the organization's research team, who partnered with CUE at the Brookings Institution as part of the NEST Malawi country study.



ABOUT THIS SERIES¹

How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?

Education systems worldwide face mounting pressure to prepare children and young people not just for academic success, but for meaningful participation in an increasingly complex world (UNESCO 2023). Growing evidence suggests that to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, children and young people need a broad set of skills, including but not limited to literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, socioemotional learning, and civic engagement (Dweck, Walton, and Cohen 2014; Martinez 2022; Radó 2020).

The Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST), a global impact network² co-led by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution and ten civil society organizations across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, seeks to understand how education systems can transform

to prioritize a “breadth of skills” —an integrated set of academic, socioemotional, and transversal competencies that enable all children and young people to thrive (Care, Anderson, and Kim 2016; UNESCO n.d.).

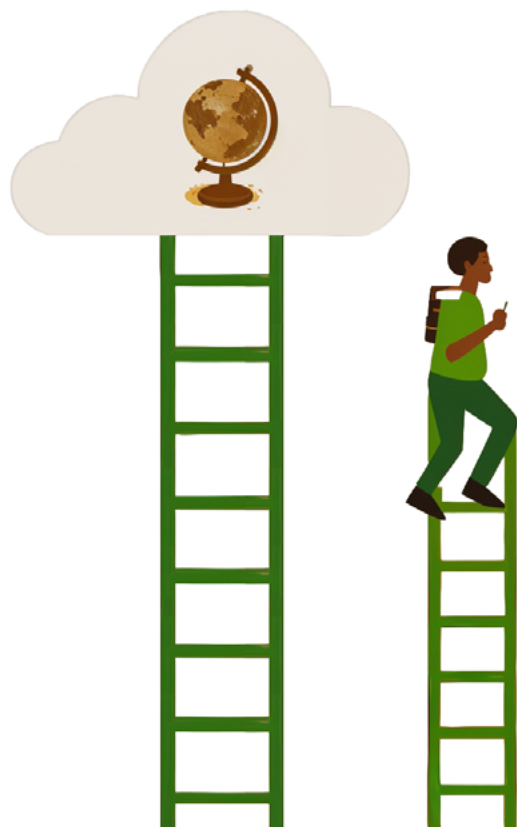
Central to our work is a shared exploratory question: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? This question acknowledges that, while concepts like “education systems,” “opportunities,” and “what matters” may differ across contexts, what binds the network is our collective commitment to understanding how education systems can transform to prioritize the development of a breadth of skills in all children and young people. Rather than prescribing universal definitions, NEST embraces locally grounded interpretations that honor the historical, cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of each setting.

1. The introductory section includes common language for the sections “About this Series,” “Framing Our Inquiry,” and “About this Report” across all the reports in the NEST “Learning What Matters” series. The original source is “Learning what matters in Kenya” (Gikandi et al. 2025).
2. Impact networks are complex living systems, made of interacting people, organizations, and ecosystems. In contrast to traditional organizations with linear processes and standard operating procedures, networks are dynamic, interconnected, and variable. For details about the model of impact networks, see Ehrlichman (2021).

FRAMING OUR INQUIRY: THE 4 Ps AND 3 Cs AS WORKING FRAMEWORKS

Informed by prior research from CUE at the Brookings Institution, NEST draws on two interconnected frameworks that guide our exploration of education systems transformation toward skills development. The 4P framework identifies four high-level domains of change in systems transformation: purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; Winthrop, Morris, and Qargha 2023). The 3C framework proposes three catalytic conditions believed to enable and sustain the transformation process: commitment, capacity, and cohesion (CUE 2022; Olateju et al. forthcoming).

We approach these frameworks not as prescriptive models, but as working theories that require interrogation, adaptation, and potential expansion based on observations in diverse local contexts. Our methodology is deliberately abductive, that is, moving systematically between observation and theoretical inference while remaining open to alternative explanations and framework modifications. This approach reflects NEST's commitment to collaborative inquiry that is iterative, values local knowledge and expertise, and contributes to a broader understanding of education systems transformation. We recognize that meaningful change cannot be externally imposed, but must emerge from genuine engagement with local realities, assets, and constraints.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

The following country-level findings represent an early stage of inquiry in NEST's ongoing exploration of education systems transformation for skills development. Exploratory in nature, the insights emerging from Malawi's unique context are an initial step toward a shared understanding of its education landscape. While findings of this research may not be directly transferable to other settings, we believe that the patterns, tensions, and possibilities identified in this report can inform broader conversations about how education systems worldwide

might better support all children and young people in developing the skills they need to thrive. As NEST continues its collaborative work across ten countries, subsequent studies aim to deepen these insights and further refine our understanding of what enables sustainable education systems transformation toward a breadth of skills. As such, the following report should not be read as a final statement, but as part of an ongoing, iterative process of learning and discovery that contributes to an emerging field.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Malawi 2063 agenda underscores the need to equip youth with relevant competencies for labor market participation, entrepreneurship, and national development (Government of Malawi 2020). However, despite significant policy commitments toward developing a workforce equipped with a breadth of relevant skills, Malawi faces significant demographic and systemic challenges (National Statistical Office 2020). This study presents an initial broad inquiry into the extent to which the Malawian education system creates opportunities for secondary school youth (forms 1-4) to acquire a breadth of skills as articulated in the 2015 Secondary School Curriculum and Assessment Framework under the Malawi 2063 vision.

The study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the extent to which Malawi's secondary education system and policy frameworks enable youth to develop a broad range of relevant skills. Data were collected from 20 schools of diverse types across six education districts, engaging educators, policymakers, parents, and students.

Despite strong policy ambition under Malawi 2063, findings illustrate a persistent gap between policy and practice in secondary education. This gap is driven by misalignment on the purpose of education, with a continued emphasis on examinations over skills development, and limited integration

of career guidance and school-to-work pathways. At the classroom level, pedagogical practices and assessment systems remain largely content-driven, while teachers lack the training and ongoing support needed to deliver skills-based learning. System-wide, weak coordination across government and partners, coupled with donor fragmentation, undermines coherence in reform efforts. These challenges are reinforced by highly centralized decisionmaking structures and weak feedback loops, which limit the system's ability to adapt and learn from implementation realities.

Closing this gap requires a shift toward a more coherent and responsive system delivery. This report provides four recommendations for local policymakers. First, the government should clarify and operationalize the purpose of secondary education, including strengthening career guidance and aligning curriculum implementation with skills outcomes. Second, priority should be given to aligning pedagogy and assessment with skills development, supported by sustained investment in teachers' professional development and mid-level system support. Third, improving coordination and alignment across government and partners, particularly in relation to donor-supported initiatives, will be critical to reduce fragmentation. Finally, establishing stronger feedback loops and increasing subnational capacity will enable more responsive decisionmaking and more effective implementation at the school level.

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CONTEXT AND CONDITIONS

Demographic, structural, and socioeconomic conditions

Malawi remains predominantly rural, with approximately 80% to 85% of the population living in rural areas and more than half of the population living below the national poverty line (World Bank 2022; 2026). GDP growth remains low, around 2% in 2024, and many figures show annual inflation around 28% to 30% (African Development Bank Group 2024). Frequent climate shocks—including Cyclone Freddy, which impacted the country in 2023—have adversely affected the economy, particularly the agriculture sector, and disrupted social sector funding (UNICEF Malawi 2023).

With Malawi’s under-18 population comprising 51% of the total population and continuing to grow (UNICEF Malawi 2023), this demographic presents both a development opportunity and a policy challenge. Without expanded access to relevant, high-quality, and skills-oriented education, youth risk socioeconomic exclusion. In addition to demographic challenges, learning poverty remains high at 87%, with only 19% of children aged 7-14 in Malawi having foundational reading skills and 13% foundational numeracy skills (UNICEF 2022a; World Bank et al. 2022). Additionally, Malawi continues to face high pupil-teacher ratios, with EMIS data indicating approximately 65 pupils per qualified teacher in primary

education, alongside acute shortages of qualified teachers in specific subjects such as Life Skills (Malawi Ministry of Education 2024). These demographic and learning challenges are intertwined and affect the ability of secondary-aged youth to acquire a breadth of relevant skills and successfully enter the labor force in Malawi.

Policy context

Globally, many nations have prioritized investment in human capital, equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills required to contribute meaningfully to national development (World Bank 2018). In Malawi, this imperative is anchored in the Malawi 2063 blueprint, which explicitly identifies that “a majority of the youth do not have the requisite skills or financial capabilities to support the development agenda of the country” (Government of Malawi 2020). In response, the education system is mandated to deliver quality, inclusive, and skills-oriented learning.

The 2063 agenda is also articulated through specific policies such as the National Education Sector Investment Plan, the Education Act, and the Secondary School Curriculum and Assessment Review (SSCAR). SSCAR was an initiative within the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) focused on ensuring that content, methods, and assessments were aligned with national education goals. The review culminated in 2025 with the Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Schools and Colleges in Malawi.

The framework introduced a new school structure to improve continuity in secondary education, embedded a skills-based approach, and shifted assessment practices toward learner-centered models (“Malawi Unveils Transformative Curriculum” 2025). This new framework marked a paradigm shift from content-heavy, outcomes-based instruction to competency-based education (CBE), emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving.

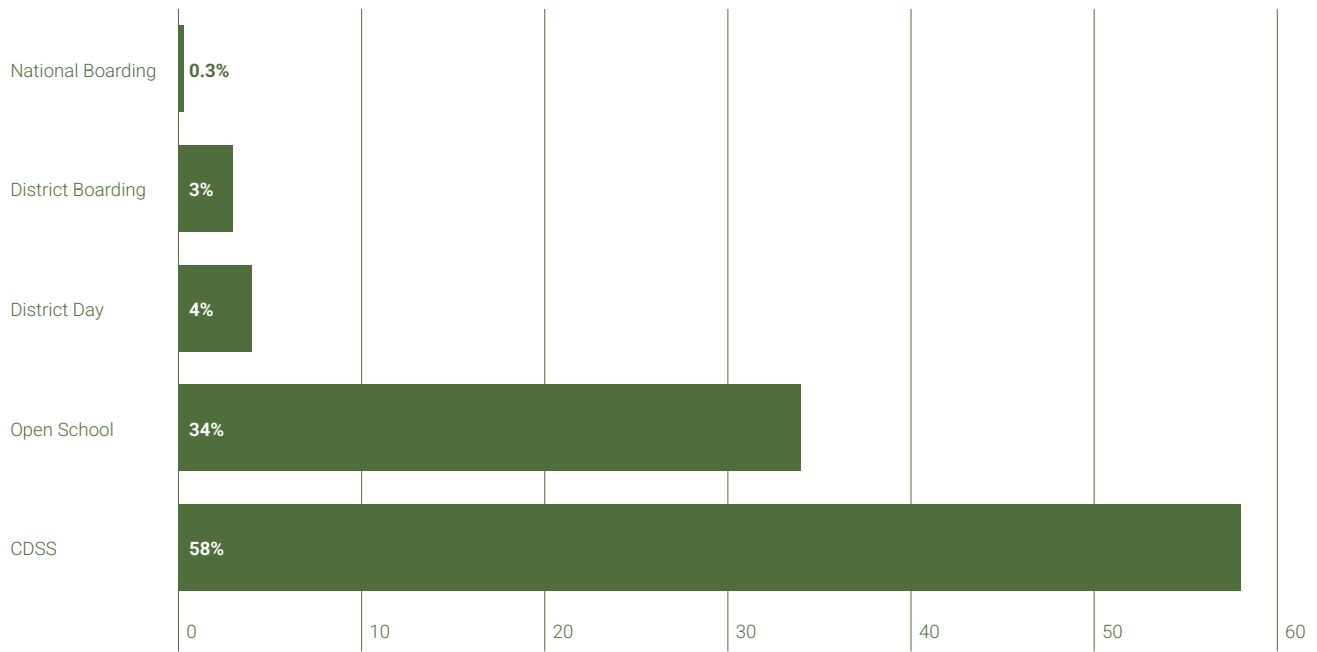
Secondary schools in Malawi

For many, secondary education has become necessary but not sufficient for securing waged employment

Malawi’s secondary education system includes district boarding schools, district day schools, Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs), open schools, and private institutions. CDSSs constitute a large share of enrollment, with their centers alone accounting for approximately 40% of students. Secondary education completion rates remain low at about 30%, and access is constrained by limited infrastructure. While there are over 7,000 primary schools in Malawi, there are only 1,916 secondary schools, the majority of which are in rural areas. Despite recent improvements, access remains limited, with gross and net enrollment rates at 27.5% and 16.8%, respectively, leaving the majority of secondary school-age youth out of school (Malawi Ministry of Education 2024). Tertiary education participation remains very low, with estimates revealing that fewer than 5% of the relevant age cohort is enrolled in higher education (UNICEF Malawi 2023).

While access has expanded over time, this growth has not translated into equitable access to quality learning or improved life opportunities. High-quality secondary education remains concentrated among a relatively small number of elite institutions, while most students—particularly those in CDSSs—face constrained learning conditions and limited relevance of education for their future pathways (Nyirongo 2018; Silver 2019). For many, secondary education has become necessary but not sufficient for securing waged employment, as an increasing number of graduates obtain the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) without corresponding labor market opportunities. This reflects a broader pattern in which educational attainment has outpaced the availability of formal employment, both in Malawi and across the region (Silver 2019). These dynamics underscore the persistent challenges in achieving not only universal access, but also meaningful and equitable skills development aligned with national development goals (Government of Malawi 2024).

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS



Source: Education statistics report 2024 (National Statistical Office and Ministry of Education, Malawi 2024)

TABLE 1: TYPES OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND CURRICULUM FOCUS

SCHOOL TYPE	DESCRIPTION	CURRICULUM FOCUS
Conventional secondary schools	Government-operated secondary schools (World Bank 2010; Malawi Ministry of Education 2020).	Follow the national curriculum leading to the MSCE with an emphasis on core academic subjects, including English, mathematics, sciences, social sciences, and agriculture (Malawi Ministry of Education 2013; Malawi Ministry of Education 2020).
District boarding schools	Public secondary schools managed at the district level with boarding facilities (Malawi Ministry of Education 2020).	Deliver the national MSCE curriculum with a primarily academic orientation and limited vocational specialization (Malawi Ministry of Education 2013; World Bank 2010).
District day schools	Government day secondary schools without boarding facilities, administered at the district level (Malawi Ministry of Education 2020).	Standard national curriculum, focused on academic subjects required for MSCE (Malawi Ministry of Education 2013).
CDSSs	Schools were originally established by communities to expand rural access to secondary education and later integrated into the public system (a majority get support from the government) (Malawi Ministry of Education 2020; World Bank 2010). 40.2% of secondary school students are in CDSSs (Malawi Ministry of Education 2024).	Implement the national curriculum but often operate with resource constraints affecting delivery quality; curriculum remains predominantly academic rather than skills-based (Malawi Ministry of Education 2020; World Bank 2010).

METHODOLOGY

NEST, in collaboration with CUE at the Brookings Institution, undertook a network-wide study to explore a co-created research question: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? The following sub-questions were developed for the Malawi country study:

How are existing policies and regulatory frameworks being implemented to promote the acquisition of a breadth of relevant skills in Malawi’s secondary education system?

What strategies are employed within the secondary education system to facilitate the acquisition of a breadth of relevant skills among students?

The study employed a convergent mixed methods research design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018) in which quantitative survey data and qualitative interview and focus group data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and interpreted together to examine how Malawi’s secondary education system and existing policy frameworks create—or fail to create—opportunities for youth to develop a breadth of relevant skills.

TABLE 2: ALIGNMENT OF RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	DATA COLLECTION METHODS	PARTICIPANTS	KEY ISSUES EXPLORED
1. To explore how well the Malawian secondary school education system is implementing policies and regulatory frameworks aimed at promoting a breadth of relevant skills.	Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	Ministry-level officials and division education managers	Policy frameworks, teacher training, policy implementation, resource allocation, and assessment systems
2. To investigate the strategies employed by the secondary education system to foster the acquisition of a breadth of relevant skills among youth.	Student survey, teacher KIIs, and parent focus group discussions (FGDs)	Students, teachers, and parents	Teaching practices, co-curricular activities, school and community opportunities for skill development, assessment methods, barriers, and enabling factors
3. To examine how institutions from different sectors collaborate to promote the acquisition of a breadth of relevant skills among secondary school youth.	KIIs	Ministry officials, division officials, and head teachers	Nature of collaboration between ministries, stakeholders, NGOs, and other institutions supporting skills development

Data collection and analysis

The study involved 20 schools across six education districts (Mwanza, Dedza, Balaka, Mulanje, Ntchisi, and Chitipa) engaging educators, policymakers, parents, and students (See Table 3 for a breakdown). Following a stakeholder mapping exercise, schools and study participants were identified utilizing a multistage cluster sampling strategy that selected education divisions, districts, and schools to ensure geographic coverage and representation of different secondary school types across Malawi. The multistage sampling involved three stages as follows:³

1. Selection of clusters in the form of education divisions (six divisions);
2. Selection of sub-clusters in the form of education districts (one district per division) and;
3. Selection of schools (four schools per district)

Semi-structured questionnaires captured descriptive data from students and teachers, while key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) explored implementation experiences and cross-actor coordination with parents and other key education ecosystem actors. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v20, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed with MaxQDA 2024, framed through the lenses of the 3C and 4P frameworks for education system transformation.⁴ These conceptual lenses enabled a deeper understanding of both the aspirations and operational realities shaping Malawi’s implementation of a breadth of relevant skills within the secondary education landscape.

TABLE 3: PARTICIPANTS BY DATA COLLECTION METHOD

METHOD	DATA COLLECTION TOOL	PARTICIPANTS
Quantitative	Student survey	419 students
	Teacher survey	57 teachers
Qualitative	KIIs	26 KIIs (four Ministry officials, ⁵ nine division officials, 13 head teachers)
	FGDs	Six parent FGDs

3. The study adopted Cochran’s formula for sample size determination. This formula was chosen because it considers the population size and desired margin of error, helping researchers determine an appropriate sample size that will provide reliable results.

4. To ensure adherence to study ethics, the study underwent ethical clearance through the National Health Sciences Research Committee (NHSRC). During data collection, participants were also asked to sign an informed consent form upon voluntary consent to participate in the study.

5. Directorate of Secondary Education, The Malawi Institute of Education, The Directorate of Teacher Education and Development and the Ministry of Labor.

Data summary

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Survey findings in Figure 2 below indicate that while exposure to skills development is nearly universal—with 98% of students reporting some opportunities, particularly through subjects such as Life Skills, Agriculture, and Technical Studies—these opportunities are often limited in depth and consistency. In Figure 3, we observe that fewer than half of students reported developing core transversal skills, with only 39.9% indicating exposure to skills such as communication (14.3%) and problem-solving (21.3%). Even fewer students reported regular opportunities to build practical or applied skills, such as cooking (4.8%) and decisionmaking (2.4%). This suggests that, although skills-based learning is present in the curriculum, it is not being delivered in a consistent or meaningful way across schools.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs revealed that although policy frameworks recognize the importance of developing a breadth of relevant skills, implementation remains challenging across the education system. Respondents highlighted several challenges, including:

Examination-oriented teaching practices, with teachers strategically focusing only on examinable content and sidelining broader competency development;

Limited teaching and learning resources, particularly in CDSSs, where the absence of science laboratories, functional Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and basic infrastructure constrains practical and experiential learning;

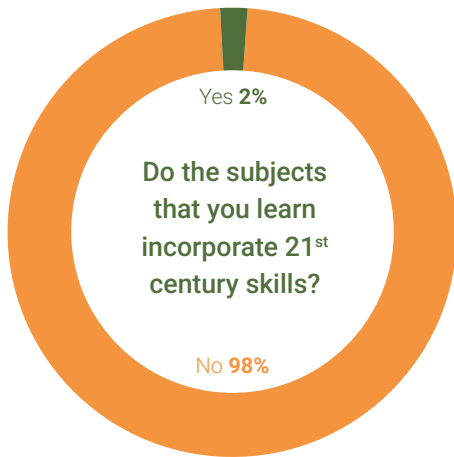
Insufficient teacher training, with many teachers—especially in CDSSs—underqualified or required to teach outside their area of specialization; and

Weak coordination among institutions responsible for youth skills development, with ministries of education, labor, youth, and technical training operating in silos despite overlapping mandates.

LIMITATIONS

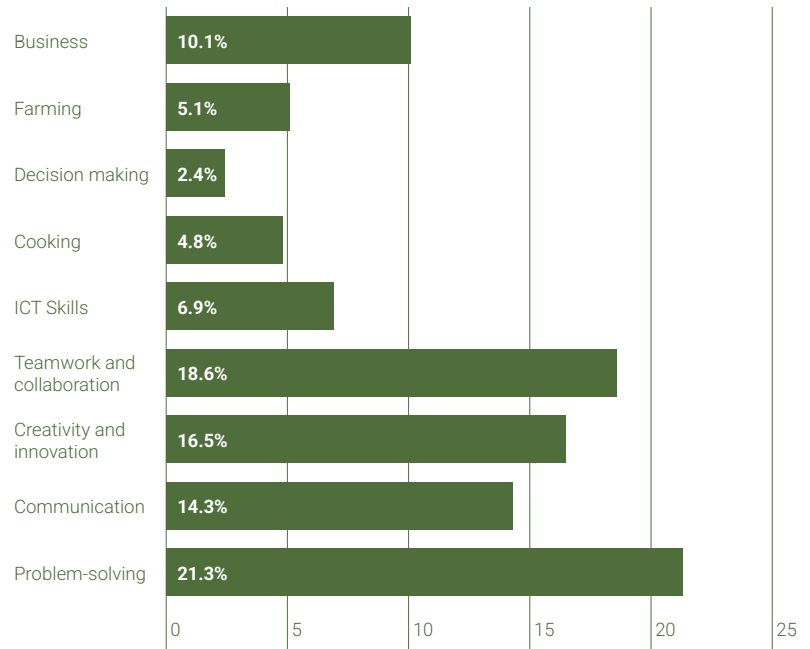
Some of the data relied on self-reported perceptions from students, teachers, parents, and government officials. Such responses may be influenced by personal interpretations or social desirability bias. To mitigate this limitation, the study triangulated findings across multiple data sources and participant groups. Additionally, due to time and resource constraints, the study did not include classroom observations or longitudinal assessments of students' skill development. Future research could strengthen the evidence base by incorporating observational methods and longer-term tracking of student outcomes.

FIGURE 2: STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION ON THE INCORPORATION OF 21ST-CENTURY SKILLS IN THE CURRICULUM



Source: Field Study 2025/CRECCOM Students Survey Data

FIGURE 3: SKILLS ACQUIRED BY LEARNERS ACROSS SUBJECTS



Source: Field Study 2025, CRECCOM Students Survey Data

Table 4 below provides a summary of key responses related to learning a breadth of relevant skills.

TABLE 4: SUMMARY OF SELECTED STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSES

QUESTION	YES	NO	PARTIALLY
Do the subjects that you learn incorporate a broad range of skills?	98%	2%	
Do you think these skills are adequately taught?	56%	17%	27%
Do you think learning a wide range of skills can benefit you in the future?	99%	1%	
Are there other opportunities/ activities at school that help you acquire a range of skills?	89%	11%	
	Very adequate	Adequate	Not adequate
How adequate are the skills you learn in your day-to-day life?	8%	57%	35%

FINDINGS

Purpose: Divergent understandings of the purpose of education in Malawi

When education does not lead to employment, disillusionment grows, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, where opportunity costs for schooling are already high.

Findings revealed an alignment between how different actors understand the purpose of education in Malawi. However, there has been divergence in implementation. For many research participants, education was seen less as a long-term developmental good and more as a means for job acquisition. When that investment yields no visible returns, motivation to support children's learning diminishes. As a senior MoEST official stated, "How different people define a better job matters. Others define a better job based on the professional attire one puts on, e.g., executive suits, while others define a better job based on the heaviness of a paycheck." Learners interested in white-collar jobs focus on competencies that will enable them to acquire such jobs. On the other hand, those interested in blue-collar jobs pay attention to vocational skills and mastering practical skills essential in their preferred career path.

While frameworks, such as the revised Curriculum and Assessment Framework, articulate education as a driver of skills development, employability, and national transformation, parents and communities, on the other hand, typically associate secondary education primarily with formal employment outcomes.

Their commitment to supporting their children's schooling is often contingent on visible labor market returns. One parent remarked, "My neighbor's daughter is not employed yet; she completed her secondary education."

This narrower focus on labor market returns gains further traction when education fails to deliver on promised employment outcomes after graduation. When education does not lead to employment, disillusionment grows, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, where opportunity costs for schooling are already high. Focus group participants repeatedly questioned the value of schooling, citing examples of secondary school graduates who remain unemployed. One respondent from Ntchisi noted regarding employers that "many do not appreciate the significance of theory, but rather appreciate demonstration of knowledge through practice." While both government and households ultimately prioritize employment outcomes, they differ in how they expect education to deliver them: policy frameworks emphasize competency-based approaches that build transferable skills over time, whereas community expectations often prioritize more immediate, visible returns through credentials or direct job readiness. This divergence in pathways creates tensions in implementation, particularly where competency-based reforms do not translate into short-term employment gains.

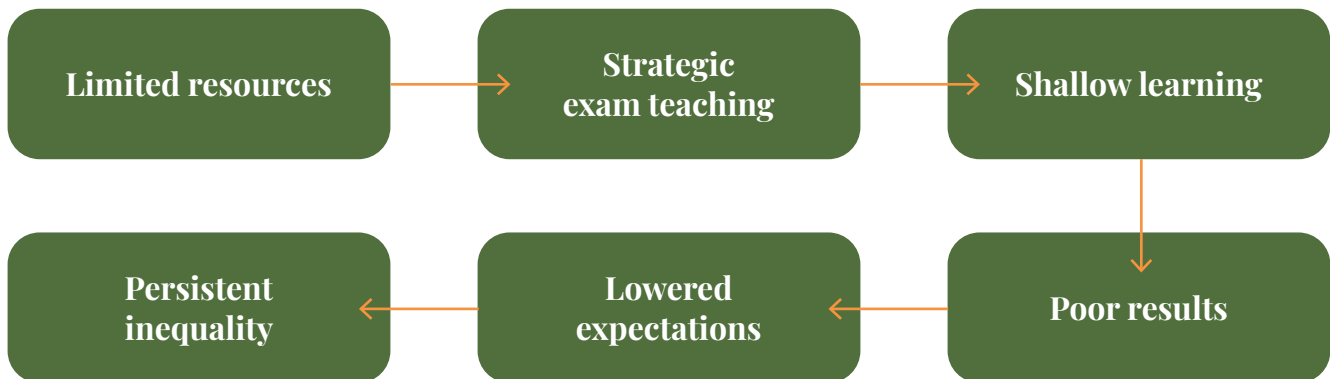
While there is alignment on the importance of employability as an expected outcome of the education system, there is a disconnect in the shift from a more outcome-based curriculum to a competency-based approach for learners. Evidence from stakeholder consultations suggests that some parents prioritize academic achievement and examination performance, which can diverge from the policy emphasis on broader skills development. This perceived misalignment can weaken engagement and trust within the system, as families redirect their attention toward activities they believe will best support their children’s success. Differences in how various actors interpret and prioritize elements of the Malawi 2063 vision contribute to broader goal misalignment within the education system.

Pedagogy: Constraints to the delivery of skills- oriented instruction

The findings also highlight pedagogical barriers that prevent the translation of the competency-based curriculum, as imagined by the Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Schools and Colleges in Malawi, into meaningful classroom practice.

Classroom instruction remains examination-driven with assessment systems reinforcing rote learning over skills development. A prevalent exam-centric culture leads to strategic teaching where teachers focus only on topics likely to be examined and sideline broader competency development.

FIGURE 4: FEEDBACK LOOP FOR STUDENT LEARNING



An official from the Directorate of Quality Assurance shared, “Teachers check exam trends and teach what they think will come. Some topics are skipped because they’re not likely to appear.” Fieldwork findings revealed that teachers in CDSSs often hold low expectations for their students, especially those selected with low exam scores, which in turn affects instructional effort and learner confidence. This dynamic creates a negative feedback loop where limited resources ultimately deepen existing inequalities.

Severe infrastructure and resource disparities also limit the implementation of more learner-centered approaches, particularly in CDSSs. Most CDSSs lack basic facilities, such as science laboratories, functional ICT infrastructure, or even standard classrooms needed to support practical and experiential learning. A teacher from Mwanza stated, “Imagine, schools like ours do not have science laboratories. Learners get to see a beaker or test tube during practical exams. Some schools with 350 learners have only five working computers out of the 10 they received.” Despite being taught the same curriculum, learners in under-resourced schools are systemically disadvantaged in acquiring a breadth of relevant skills.

Additionally, constraints in the teacher workforce significantly undermine instructional quality and the effective implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Schools and Colleges in Malawi. Teacher shortages, underqualification, and proxy teaching—where teachers are required to teach subjects outside their area of

expertise—limit the depth and quality of instruction. National data indicate that 18% of secondary school teachers are untrained (Government of Malawi 2024), while in some districts, such as Nsanje, 42% of teachers hold only the MSCE as their highest qualification (Government of Malawi 2024).

These challenges are particularly acute in rural areas where teacher allocation remains uneven. Districts such as Mwanza and Neno operate with significantly fewer teachers than required, with 205 teachers across 16 schools in Mwanza and 218 teachers across 24 schools in Neno (an average of just nine teachers per school in the latter) (Government of Malawi 2024). As a result, teachers are often required to multitask across subjects, contributing to burnout and further reducing instructional quality. In contrast, urban and peri-urban areas such as Blantyre, Lilongwe, and Mzuzu benefit from relatively higher teacher availability.

Qualitative evidence reinforced these realities. A head teacher in Mulanje highlighted the “lack of resources, qualified teachers, [and] motivation” as key barriers to effective teaching, while also noting the potential role of community and parental support in improving learning conditions. Similarly, a Technical, Entrepreneurial, and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVET) director pointed to systemic challenges in aligning education with labor market demands, noting that “it’s not easy to predict jobs... [and] it is also difficult to find the rightly qualified teachers for new avenues,” underscoring the difficulty of recruiting and preparing teachers for emerging fields.

Severe infrastructure and resource disparities also limit the implementation of more learner-centered approaches.

Redesigning the pedagogical core—the interaction between teachers, learners, content, and tools—is central to delivering on any educational purpose. However, the study highlights multiple intersecting constraints that compromise meaningful teaching and learning in secondary schools. These findings are consistent with broader system-level evidence. An evaluation of the Curriculum and Assessment Framework (2015) found that, despite reform efforts, the curriculum has struggled to equip students with the knowledge and skills required for the 21st century. In practice, implementation remains heavily skewed toward summative assessment, with limited emphasis on formative approaches (Ministry of Education and Malawi Institute of Education 2025). As a result, both teaching and learning continue to prioritize examination performance over the development and demonstration of practical competencies.

This misalignment limits the development of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for navigating the modern workforce. It is further compounded by the slow integration of ICT and digital literacy, as well as by persistent constraints in teacher capacity and infrastructure highlighted in this study. While the 2015 framework envisioned learners transferring skills beyond the classroom and engaging in lifelong learning, in practice, learning remains largely focused on rote memorization rather than applied competencies.

Concerns around relevance and inclusion further reinforce these gaps. The curriculum has been criticized

for overemphasizing academic achievement at the expense of vocational pathways and character development, limiting opportunities for diverse career trajectories (Ministry of Education and Malawi Institute of Education 2025). Although policy frameworks emphasize entrepreneurial and vocational competencies (Government of Malawi 2015), implementation remains constrained by teacher shortages, lack of equipment, and persistent perceptions that such skills are primarily suited for lower-performing learners.

Positioning: Fragmented roles and weak cross-sector coordination

The data also highlights coordination challenges among actors in the Malawian education ecosystem, which have hindered the implementation of curricular and assessment-based reforms. Cross-sectoral coordination is weak, and ministries such as Labor, Youth, and Industry—which are critical for aligning skills development with workforce pathways—operate in silos. A civil society member stated, “There is no coherence in policies. For example, TVET falls under the Ministry of Labor, yet they are supposed to train people, but training happens in the Ministry of Education.” This demonstrates the need for the coordination of key ministries with similar societal mandates. System fragmentation is also evident in the weak coordination between government departments and donors, siloed interventions, and poor data use.

One case described by an official at the ministry involved a principal secretary's⁶ daughter mistakenly receiving a bursary intended for vulnerable girls, due to blanket application in the absence of targeted data.

Fragmentation is also visible in the rollout of technical and teaching training programs.

Fragmentation is also visible in the rollout of technical and teaching training programs. Only 33 out of 1,610 secondary schools currently have technical facilities, with an additional 76 supported through the Improving Secondary Education in Malawi (ISEM) project, yet this expansion will still leave more than 93% of schools unequipped for technical education under the new curriculum. This gap reflects not only chronic underfunding but a failure of coordinated planning: the actors responsible for equipping schools (MoEST, development partners, and university training institutions) do not have a shared roadmap that strategically sequences infrastructure, teacher supply, and curriculum rollout. A respondent from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) acknowledged this, noting that “we are sending teachers to MUBAS and the University of Malawi to specialize in technical and vocational subjects, but this is still a drop in the ocean.” This was a candid admission that teacher training is advancing without a corresponding expansion of necessary infrastructure. So far, fewer than 100 teachers have undergone training at these two universities to specialize in vocational skills. These teachers are expected to be deployed in secondary schools. The limited number of teachers being sent for further training is likely to place additional pressure on the education system,

which already serves approximately 538,800 secondary school students nationwide and maintains a pupil-qualified teacher ratio of 65:1 (Ministry of Education 2024). The curriculum and assessment framework provides guidance to teacher training institutions regarding the skills required for effective curriculum implementation. However, the gaps in the limited number of student teachers in such core subjects highlight the lack of coordination among key institutions involved in teacher training.

The MoEST relies heavily on budget allocations from the Ministry of Finance to implement its programs, but available funding often does not fully meet sector needs. This is shaped by broader macroeconomic constraints. Malawi's economy grew only modestly by approximately 1.4% in 2023, up from approximately 0.9% in 2022 (World Bank 2024), while inflation has remained high, reaching over 34% (Chiwanda and Mangazi 2025).

Since 2013, Malawi has experienced persistent fiscal deficits exceeding 6% of GDP, which has contributed to a large increase in public debt from 30.5% of GDP in 2012 to 59.4% in 2019. This increase was largely driven by high-cost domestic borrowing (World Bank 2020). Within this constrained context, the share of the national budget allocated to education has increased from 14.7% in 2024/2025 to 16.6% in 2025/2026 (UNICEF 2025), although it remains below the 20% Dakar Commitment. However, this increase has not translated evenly across subsectors. The share allocated to secondary education has declined from

6. In Malawi, a principal secretary is the senior administrative head and controlling officer of a government ministry or department.

14% to 12% of the education budget, while public debt servicing (18% of the national budget) continues to crowd out social sector spending (UNICEF 2022b). The recent 50% reduction in USAID funding further risks reversing gains in the sector. As one senior Ministry official noted, “The Ministry of Education can only supply to the degree to which they receive funding from the Ministry of Finance.”

At the same time, the composition of education spending raises concerns for skills development. Nearly 78% of funding is allocated to Other Recurrent Transactions (ORTs), while comparatively limited resources are directed toward quality-enhancing inputs. For example, very limited funding is allocated to teacher training, with some years showing no budget for in-service training (UNICEF 2019). Funding for teaching and learning materials has also declined from MWK⁷ 14.6 billion in 2024/2025 to MWK 11.9 billion in 2025/2026. While 28% is allocated to teaching and learning materials overall (UNICEF 2025), resources specifically supporting the delivery of practical and skills-based learning remain constrained. Available evidence suggests that funding is not sufficiently targeted toward technical and vocational education and other skills development pathways, limiting the system’s ability to equip learners with relevant competencies. Overall, while education spending has increased modestly, it remains heavily oriented toward recurrent costs, with insufficient investment in the inputs required to deliver on the system’s skills development objectives.

Power: Centralization, donor influence, and the exclusion of marginalized system actors

Findings show that the concentration of power among decisionmakers and donors can lead to the exclusion of more marginalized actors in the education ecosystem. A senior MoEST official shared:

We fail to say no to a donor. I think we need to accept donor projects that are in line with our policy documents; what exactly do we want to implement? How do we want to implement it? Donors need not impose on us. We have a certain program where donors gave us tablets, but the content did not conform to our country. We asked to realign the content to our country’s curriculum, they said we cannot change; we have no right to change it. Should we be happy that we have been given a program?

Curriculum developers and stakeholders in the education ecosystem have minimal say on some donor-funded programs. Often, rural schools, teachers, learners, and parents have limited influence over policy design despite being those most affected by implementation outcomes.

Findings suggest that donor-driven interventions are sometimes misaligned with systemic priorities and local realities, which can reinforce

7. Malawian Kwacha is the national currency of Malawi.

inequities and existing financial power dynamics within the education system. Malawi's education sector is significantly supported by development partners. Recent estimates indicate that development partners contributed approximately 20.4% of the education sector budget in the 2024/25 financial year, an increase from 14.8% in 2023/24, reflecting a growing reliance on external financing for key sector investments (UNICEF 2024). Moreover, external partners finance a substantial share of development expenditures, accounting for an estimated 67% of capital investments in recent years, including infrastructure and system strengthening (UNICEF 2022b). Development partners play a critical role in financing education systems in low-income countries, as they rely heavily on external aid for infrastructure and service delivery (Silver, Menashy, and Morley 2025).

This level of dependence gives external actors considerable influence over sector priorities, including infrastructure development, digital tools, and program design. At the same time, it increases the system's vulnerability to fluctuations in external funding. Recent reductions in donor support, including changes in USAID funding, have placed additional pressure on already constrained school operating budgets, with implications for the continuity and quality of education delivery (Silver et al. 2025). These dynamics highlight the need for greater alignment, coordination, and sustainability in education financing.

Funding constraints in CDSSs, which serve a large share of learners, further exacerbate inequities in educational provision. The average recurrent unit

cost per secondary school student was estimated at approximately MK175,287 in 2023/24, reflecting substantial increases over time (Malawi Ministry of Education 2024). Despite this, many CDSSs rely heavily on minimal school-level contributions and community fundraising to meet basic operational needs. As one senior ministry official noted, "Learners from disadvantaged schools may not be attended to in the same way as those with resources. In health, critical patients are referred to specialists. In education, learners from poor backgrounds are sent to equally under-resourced schools." These structural funding constraints contribute to unequal learning conditions and undermine efforts to ensure equitable opportunities for skill development across the system.

While community and parental engagement partially compensate for systemic gaps, their engagement remains informal and undervalued within the formal education system. This highlights the disconnect between grassroots efforts and institutional structures. These findings expose a misalignment of roles and responsibilities and highlight the need for stronger feedback loops between decisionmakers and school-level actors. Who gets to decide, speak, and shape education matters, and curriculum consultation processes often favor urban and semi-urban stakeholders. Rural communities and learners rarely participate. In an interview in Mwanza, a head teacher shared that "[the] MIE consults the public, but few learners and teachers from marginalized settings are involved." The research underscores that transformation cannot be equitable without naming and navigating power dynamics, both seen and unseen.

Development partners play a critical role in financing education systems in low-income countries, as they rely heavily on external aid for infrastructure and service delivery (Silver, Menashy, and Morley 2025).

A REFLECTION OF 3Cs ACROSS THE SYSTEM

Based on the findings and analysis of purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power, addressing issues of commitment, capacity, and cohesion can influence the successful implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Schools and Colleges in secondary classrooms in Malawi.

COMMITMENT

The study revealed that signaling at the policy level does not always translate to commitment at the school and community levels due to limited awareness of and engagement with policy priorities. Specifically, there was a significant discrepancy between policy commitments and actual adherence, particularly at the implementation level. While policy awareness and alignment are relatively high among officials at the ministry and division levels,

often reinforced through pre-service training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD), teachers and head teachers demonstrate limited familiarity with these frameworks. A respondent from the Northern Education Division shared, “If a new policy comes into effect, it is disseminated so that everyone is aware ... and we go to schools to check implementation.” Yet, quantitative data show that less than 60% of head teachers and only 26.5% of teachers highlighted the curriculum as a guiding policy, with even fewer awareness of other policy instruments (See Table 5).

This limited awareness is partly attributed to the inaccessibility and length of policy documents, coupled with a declining reading culture among practitioners, as described by a quality assurance officer in the Northern Education Division.

TABLE 5: TEACHERS’ AWARENESS OF POLICIES GUIDING EDUCATION

NAME OF POLICY/Framework	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
The curriculum	13	26.5%
Readmission Policy	8	16.3%
MW Agenda 2063	8	16.3%
Inclusive Education Policy	6	12.2%
National Education Standards	5	10.2%
National Education Policy	5	10.2%
National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy	2	4.1%
National ICT Policy	1	2.0%
Gender Policy	1	2.0%

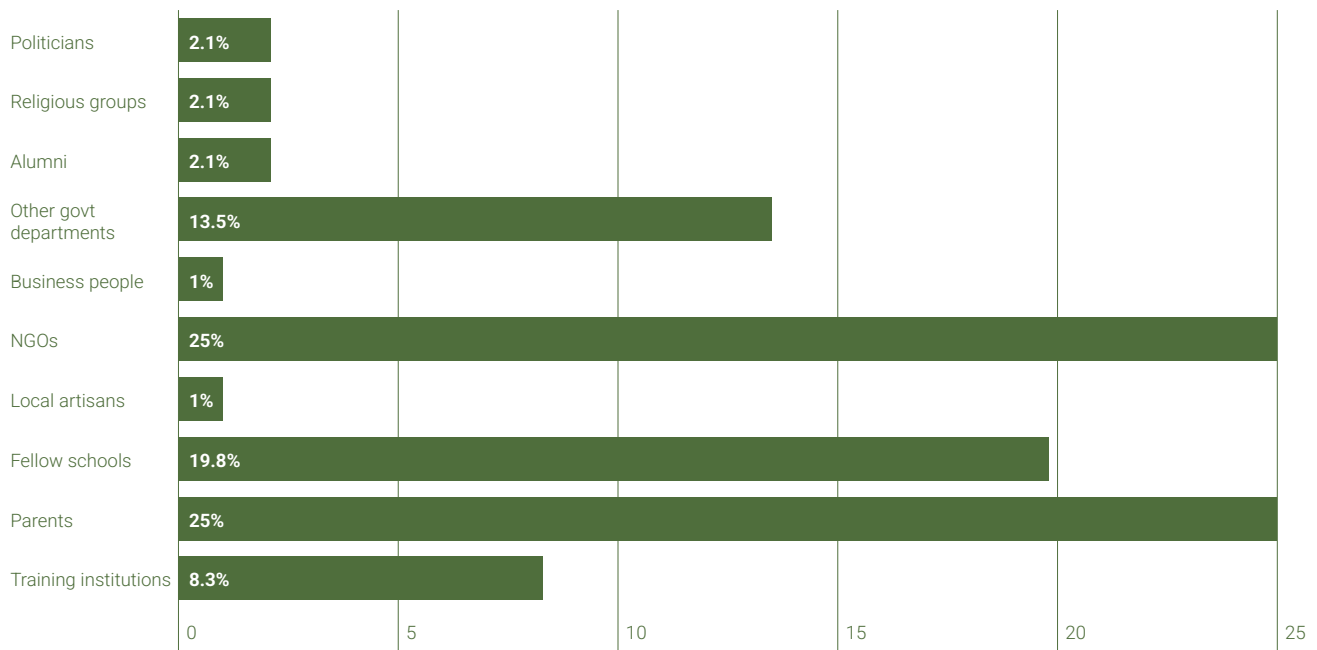
The implication is a fragmented implementation environment, where the absence of shared understanding results in inconsistent or partial adherence to national education priorities. This results in what one senior official described as “surface compliance,” where schools may nominally follow the reform directives but fall short of internalizing or systematically applying them.

CAPACITY

The Malawian secondary education system suffers from chronic capacity deficits—primarily in infrastructure, financing, and digital access—that constrain policy implementation despite potential commitment. One head teacher from Mwanza shared a rare success story enabled by partnership: “We have unlimited internet powered

by Airtel, which is helping our students learn through the tablets that are here. Learners learn beyond classroom walls. Our ICT here is not all that simple; it is sophisticated.” However, such cases remain the exception. In most schools, digital access is either unreliable or absent, significantly limiting learners’ exposure to technology-enabled skills; 71% of the sampled schools in this survey did not have access to computers. In 2024, the government initiated the construction of ICT laboratories in 75 CDSSs, representing roughly eight percent of all CDSSs nationwide (Chilimunthaka 2024; Ponje 2024). Access to electricity is another limiting factor to digital access: only 56 percent of secondary schools rely on the Electricity Supply Commission of Malawi (ESCOM), while a significant proportion have no electricity (Malawi Ministry of Education 2024).

FIGURE 5: STAKEHOLDERS ENHANCING SYSTEM CAPACITY FOR A BREADTH OF RELEVANT SKILLS



Source: Field Study 2025
Cohesion

Without stronger vertical and horizontal coordination, improved funding equity, and data-driven decisionmaking, Malawi's secondary education system will remain fragmented and ill-equipped to deliver a breadth of relevant skills to all learners.

Despite resource constraints, many schools actively engage stakeholders to bridge capacity gaps. The study identified NGOs, parents, community leaders, the private sector, members of Parliament, and ministries—such as the Ministry of Finance—as key collaborators (see Figure 5). NGOs also contribute significantly by supporting infrastructure development, digital learning, and teacher training. Schools frequently convene Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings to involve communities in decisionmaking, suggest critical life skills to focus on, discuss academic performance, and mobilize resources. During FGDs with parents, a participant shared, “We inform teachers during PTA meetings to focus on equipping learners with relevant survival skills, including tactics of civic engagement,” demonstrating parents’ interest in having learners with skills that would make them thrive in life.

These multi-actor collaborations demonstrate that while the system’s internal capacity remains weak, external partnerships can provide essential support in building resilience and innovation within schools. As time and regimes change, the priorities and focus of the education system shift. While the colonial and postcolonial eras focused on skills development, the post-independence and democracy eras’ focus has been on enhancing cognitive skills for absorption into white-collar jobs (Sharra and Silver 2023).

COHESION

Despite systemic weaknesses, the study found that relationships among teachers, learners, and parents serve as important cohesion points within the education system. Focus group discussions revealed that many parents are actively involved in school life, regularly attending meetings and reinforcing positive behavior and attitudes toward learning:

“Meeting with teachers encourages the child when they realize their parents support the skills they are learning. They do it with all their heart to meet those expectations.” (Parent, Msinda CDSS, Ntchisi)

“A child is raised by the community. Our role is to build their social life while teachers handle the academic part.” (Parent, Mphunzi CDSS, Dedza)

These shared responsibilities foster a common vision for education among families and schools, though they cannot replace the need for systemic integration.

Ultimately, without stronger vertical and horizontal coordination, improved funding equity, and data-driven decisionmaking, Malawi’s secondary education system will remain fragmented and ill-equipped to deliver a breadth of relevant skills to all learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights some of the systemic misalignments within Malawi's secondary education ecosystem that limit implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Framework and its capacity to deliver a breadth of relevant skills for all learners. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across policy, institutional, and school levels. The following recommendations for national policymakers in Malawi focus on strengthening commitment, capacity, and cohesion across the system while addressing issues related to purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power.

STRENGTHEN DIALOGUE AROUND THE PURPOSE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION (COMMITMENT)

The study revealed divergent understandings of the primary purpose of secondary education between policymakers and communities. While national policies emphasize skills development, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning, many parents and communities continue to view secondary education primarily as a pathway to formal employment. Consequently, community support for schooling is often contingent upon visible labor market returns, contributing to declining trust in the education system when such outcomes do not materialize.

Policy actions

Promote community engagement around the purpose of education. The MoEST must strengthen dialogue

between schools, communities, and policymakers to communicate the broader goals of secondary education, including the development of transferable competencies, entrepreneurship, and diverse career pathways. School leaders are encouraged to reinforce these messages during Parent–Teacher Association meetings and other community forums.

Strengthen career guidance and school-to-work awareness. Schools should establish structured career guidance programs that expose learners and parents to multiple post-secondary pathways, including tertiary education, technical and vocational training, entrepreneurship, agribusiness, and opportunities within the informal sector.

Improve accessibility of policy frameworks. Key policy documents, including the Curriculum and Assessment Framework, ought to be simplified and translated into accessible formats to enhance understanding among teachers, school leaders, learners, and communities. The Ministry is encouraged to utilize digital platforms and other innovative dissemination strategies to ensure that teachers and school leaders are better informed about policy frameworks and implementation expectations.

Strengthening a shared understanding of educational purpose can enhance trust, deepen community engagement, and reinforce commitment to long-term education goals and strengthen student motivation to engage meaningfully with their own learning.

ALIGN PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BREADTH OF RELEVANT SKILLS (CAPACITY)

The findings indicate that classroom practice remains heavily examination-driven, limiting opportunities for learners to develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Teacher shortages, proxy teaching, and resource constraints further undermine the implementation of competency-based instruction.

Policy actions

Reform national assessment systems. The Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) and the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Supervision are mandated to expand the use of continuous assessment, project-based learning, and competency-based evaluation methods to better reflect the objectives of the Curriculum and Assessment Framework.

Strengthen incentives for practical and non-examinable skills. Schools are encouraged to promote learner participation in non-examinable subjects such as Physical Education, Arts and Crafts, and other practical skills by organizing exhibitions, competitions, and open days. Such initiatives can enhance learner engagement while raising awareness among parents and communities about the value of these skills. Local artisans and practitioners may also be engaged as resource persons, following appropriate procedures.

Strengthen teacher professional development. The Directorate of Teacher Education and Development is called upon to expand CPD programs focusing on learner-centered pedagogy, skills-based instruction, and the integration of technology in teaching and learning.

Reduce proxy teaching and strengthen subject specialization. Teacher recruitment and deployment policies must prioritize subject specialization, particularly in science, ICT, and technical subjects required under the revised curriculum. Where teachers are assigned outside their areas of specialization, cluster-based mentoring and CPD initiatives should support capacity development.

Address the shortage of specialist teachers for transversal and 21st-century skills. Given the shortage in qualified teachers for transversal and 21st-century skills and life skills, the MoEST is mandated to deploy qualified teachers to all schools for the fidelity of implementation of the curriculum and assessment framework. With the limited fiscal space, the MoEST shall promote cluster-based peer learning and incentivize specialist teacher recruitment.

Together, these reforms would strengthen the pedagogical core by aligning curriculum goals, teaching practices, and assessment systems with the development of a broader range of learner competencies as outlined in the new curricular framework.

IMPROVE CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT (COHESION)

The findings reveal fragmentation among ministries and institutions responsible for education, labor, youth development, and technical training. This lack of coordination weakens efforts to align education with labor market needs and limits the effectiveness of national skills development initiatives.

Policy actions

Establish a national coordination mechanism for skills development. The government must strengthen collaboration among the Ministries of Education, Labor, Youth, Industry, and TVET through a formal inter-ministerial platform focused on youth skills

development. Regular and structured coordination mechanisms would help reduce fragmentation and improve policy coherence.

Align education and workforce development policies. Joint planning and data-sharing systems must be developed to track learner transitions from secondary education to higher education, training, and employment.

Expand partnerships with the private sector and civil society. Schools are encouraged to collaborate with local businesses, NGOs, and community organizations to provide practical learning opportunities, mentorship, and exposure to emerging skills.

Improved cross-sector coordination will strengthen pathways from education to employment and entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study, addressing the 4P misalignments identified in the findings depends on strengthening commitment, capacity, and cohesion as outlined in the recommendations. The largest challenge for the Malawian education system is not a lack of policy vision, but rather the systemic misalignment between purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power that constrains education systems transformation. Sustainable change depends on strengthening a shared understanding of the purpose of secondary education

in Malawi and a vision that prioritizes youth developing a relevant breadth of skills. Transformation also requires increased internal capacity to address teacher shortages and specialization and increased coordination among different ministries and departments that support secondary education. Finally, it is essential that amid efforts for transformation, power is distributed equitably and all education ecosystem actors have the chance to contribute ideas and solutions for their own educational communities.

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ANNEX 1: RESPONDENTS OUTREACH

LEARNERS

DIVISION	DISTRICT	SCHOOL NAME	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
CEED	Ntchisi	Kasakula Secondary	8	5	13
		Msinda CDSS	6	6	12
		Ntchisi Secondary	6	6	12
CWED	Dedza	Dedza Secondary	0	25	25
		Linthipe Secondary	6	6	12
		Mphunzi CDSS	13	12	25
		Umbwi Secondary	11	13	24
NED	Chitipa	Chitipa Secondary	11	10	21
		Kameme CDSS	10	9	19
		Kaseye Secondary	20	0	20
SEED	Balaka	Balaka Secondary	18	17	35
		Chendausiku CDSS	13	15	28
SHED	Mulanje	Chakhwaza Secondary	16	11	27
		Kamphoni CDSS	13	15	28
		Nansomba Secondary	17	12	29
		Providence Secondary	21	0	21
SWED	Mwanza	Mphande CDSS	7	5	12
		Mwanza Secondary	6	7	13
		Thawale CDSS	6	6	12
Total			208	180	388

TEACHERS

DIVISION	DISTRICT	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL	TOTAL
SEED	Balaka	3	3	6	13
NED	Chitipa	4	5	9	12
CWED	Dedza	2	10	12	12
SHED	Mulanje	2	10	12	25
SWED	Mwanza	4	5	9	12
CEED	Ntchisi	3	6	9	25
Total		18	39	57	24

KEY INFORMANTS

TYPE OF INFORMANTS	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	TOTAL
Ministry level	4	1	5	6
Division level	6	2	8	9
School level	13	6	19	12

FGDs

DISTRICT	SCHOOL NAME	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Chitipa	Kameme CDSS	2	4	6
Mulanje	Chakwaza CDSS	1	6	7
Balaka	Chiyendausiku CDSS	0	7	7
Ntchisi	Nsinda CDSS	4	2	6
Mwanza	Mphande CDSS	2	5	7
Dedza	Mphunzi CDSS	6	4	10
	Total	15	28	43

ANNEX 2: DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION FRAMEWORK

THE 3CS: OUR DRIVERS OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

NEST is working to understand how increased commitment, capacity, and cohesion among all ecosystem actors in a local jurisdiction can help education systems pivot to deliver the range of skills each child and young person needs to be successful and lead in a rapidly changing world.

Commitment: Increase the interest, engagement, and action of all stakeholders to effectively reorient and resource education systems to support a breadth of skills.

Capacity: Improve knowledge, skills, and resources required by all stakeholders to eliminate systemic barriers toward the breadth of skills.

Cohesion: Develop a shared vision and agenda for transforming systems by implementing policies and practices that support the breadth of skills.

THE 4PS APPROACH TO EDUCATION SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

PURPOSE	PEDAGOGY	POSITIONING	POWER
Develop a shared vision of the purpose of education. Develop a vision of the purpose of your system that meets the moment we are in and is broadly shared inside and outside of education.	(Re) design systems starting with the pedagogical core. Redesign the interactions between learners (including those out of school), educators, content, and resources to deliver on your vision and purpose.	Position and align system components to support the pedagogical core. Fundamentally align the components of your education system to support the pedagogical core redesign and deliver on your vision and purpose.	Transformation efforts cannot be truly inclusive and equitable without naming and understanding the underlying power dynamics. Power in this context is seen in the following parameters: influence, participation, and decision-making dynamics.

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