Leh Wi Lan
Improving Secondary Education in Sierra Leone

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CAMBRIDGE EDUCATION

The School Quality Assurance Officers cadre and ways forward

INFORMATION BRIEF

This document provides an overview of the progress made, presents achievements and data and provides suggestions to help School Quality Assurance Officers continue contributing to the improvement of schools in Sierra Leone.

Introduction

In the early stages of the UK aid-funded Leh Wi Lan programme, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) identified the need for more school-level support to help improve the quality of teaching and learning. The existing number of supervisors and inspectors was too small and not mobile enough to provide regular or effective support to schools.

Leh Wi Lan employed 220 School Support Officers (SSOs) to provide regular coaching and support to teachers. The rationale was to demonstrate the value of such a cadre and provide evidence to support more sustainable investment in quality assurance by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE).

In late 2020, MBSSE announced the recruitment of approximately 175 School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs), whose roles encompassed the function of the LWL SSOs, and more. Since then, Leh Wi Lan has been working to support MBSSE develop the capacity and effective functioning of SQAOs.

SQAOs and the system that surrounds them have been provided with a wide range of support from LWL in the last two years:

- **175 SQAOs** supported with a structured capacity development including induction, regular training and peer learning circles.

- **Digitisation of SQAO tools** with automated supportive supervision advice.

- **Dashboards** to monitor performance and hold SQAOs to account.

- **Collaborations** with World Bank FREE on improved SQAO tools.

Support from Leh Wi Lan has resulted in encouraging improvements in key areas:

- **74% of SQAOs** meeting the target of eight school visits per month in October and November 2022, up from 27% when we began tracking this metric a year earlier (see Figure 1).

- **Average of 1,750** school quality assurance visits per month in Term 1 2022/23 against a target of roughly 1,400 (based on eight per SQAO).

- **Tracking of schools** visited by SQAOs and displayed in a colour-coded graphic developed in collaboration with Fab Inc (see Figure 2).

- **Data and actionable recommendations** from SQAOs informing evidence-based decision making at individual school and aggregated levels.

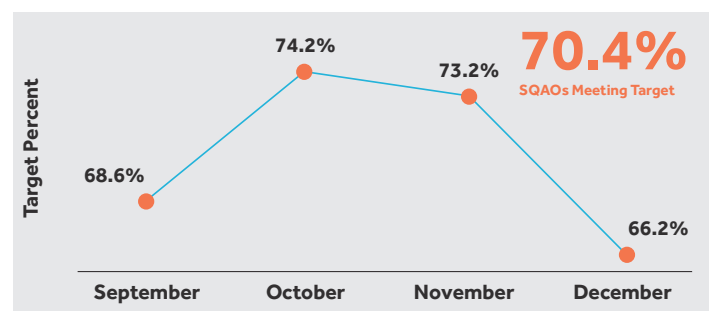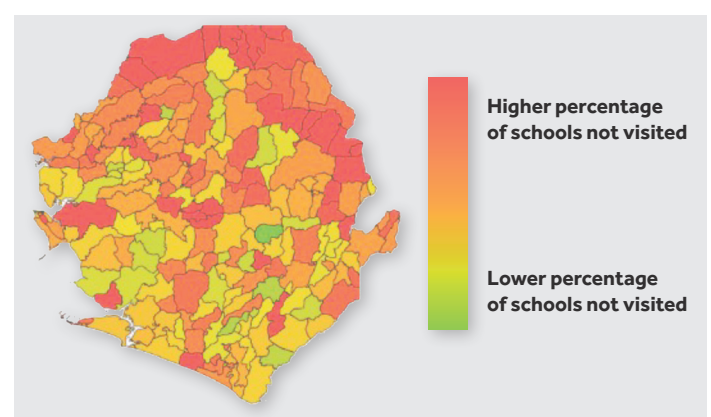**Figure 1:** Meeting Target for School Visits (Sept-Dec 2022)

Figure 2: Schools not receiving an SQAO visit (2022-2023)

Higher percentage of schools not visited

Lower percentage of schools not visited

This Information Brief summarises key findings and recommendations from recent research and feedback activities that relate to three different aspects of SQAO performance:

• **Activity:** research in partnership with the Ed Tech Hub looking at the large variation in the level of activity of SQAOs (school visits made and forms submitted).

• **Capacity:** a self-reflection process for SQAOs to identify their areas of strength and priorities for development and support.

• **Process:** collaboration with MBSSE and the World Bank's Free Project (FREE) to develop a new external school quality assurance tool as part of reforms to develop a more integrated internal and external quality assurance system.

SQAO Activity - Investigating SQAO activity levels with Ed Tech Hub

When SQAOs were first appointed, there were no clear metrics or expectations of how often they would visit schools to conduct supportive supervision activities. Leh Wi Lan and MBSSE discussed this with SQAOs and District Education Offices and it was decided that, given their other roles and responsibilities, a target of eight school visits a month was realistic and fair. Since this target was agreed, this benchmark has been used nationally to help hold SQAOs to account. SQAOs can see how many visits they have completed on their tablets and district officials can view this for any SQAO on a real-time dashboard. The SQAO Directorate within the central MBSSE unit compiles a monthly summary of individual and district performance. They monitor progress against the target of eight school visits per month for each SQAO and also look at the comparative performance of districts. Since starting to track this metric, the number of SQAOs meeting the target has increased from 27% to over 70%. While the majority have been slightly over, or slightly under, this target, there has been a notable minority that has been making twenty visits or more a month.

To get under the surface of these numbers, Leh Wi Lan conducted research with EdTech Hub. The research looked at SQAOs with high, medium and low activity levels in Bo and Kenema districts to understand more about key factors affecting the quantity of school visits. In doing this, we hoped to identify ways of increasing the number of visits in the future.

A full paper on this research is currently being produced but some of the key findings and recommendations are outlined below:

School allocation makes a uniform national target unfair: In both districts (Bo and Kenema) the SQAOs with the highest activity levels were those in more urban areas with large numbers of schools within walking distance from the office. Conversely, SQAOs with the lowest activity levels were those with schools furthest away from district centres, where SQAOs are based. The number of schools allocated to each SQAO was higher for the urban SQAOs in both districts (139 versus 70 and 60 versus 50), implying more schools would be visited by them than their peers covering more rural areas. In Bo, one SQAO said their nearest school was two hours away and many required an overnight visit.

Recommendation: It is clear that a uniform target for activity levels is not appropriate given the variety in the contexts that SQAOs face. A more nuanced and realistic approach to target setting is needed to help hold all SQAOs to account in a fairer way. Re-considering where SQAOs are based, at least for some of the time, may also help reduce travel time and enable more visits to more rural schools. Finally, remote visits may help provide support to rural schools where physical visits are harder.

Without adequate transport only urban schools receive support: All SQAOs referenced the importance of the motorbikes they have to do their job and visit schools. Many cited the challenges when motorbikes had maintenance issues, with several SQAOs reporting that they had to pay themselves for repairs/lubricant to keep them running. In addition, five of the eight SQAOs interviewed reported the 10 litres of fuel allocated by Leh Wi Lan was at times insufficient to cover all their planned visits and they had bought fuel themselves. Notably, four of these five were SQAOs with medium or low-level activity profiles, indicating that for those with more dispersed clusters, transport issues were having an impact on school visits.

Recommendation: Transport investment is critical to the effectiveness of SQAOs, particularly those supporting marginalised schools. Transport should be seen as an essential part of employing the SQAO cadre. Support for transport needs to be differentiated by context to ensure adequate fuel and maintenance provision given distances and terrain. It also needs to take into account the transport preferences of female SQAOs.

Simpler data collection forms are used more often than complex ones, even if they provide less value to the process: SQAOs at all activity levels completed more attendance verification forms than school quality assurance reports or lesson observations. The attendance verification form is the simplest and quickest form to complete, and it may be being used to inflate activity levels but it adds the least value to making a school visit.

Recommendation: More needs to be done to make all SQAO forms simpler. Finding ways to make completing forms easier and less time-consuming will help improve the quality and effectiveness of school visits and enable the focus to be on in-person interaction and support rather than ensuring the completeness of reports. Agreeing on a more streamlined report and the key indicators that will be reviewed and used to improve process and practice should be part of this.

SQAO Capacity - Using self-reflection to identify priorities for professional development

As newly recruited SQAOs began their second full academic year in the role, we sought to gain insight on where they felt they had made the most progress, and where they needed further support and guidance. The aim was to understand what had most helped recipients of significant support and identify future professional development priorities.

The self-reflection was conducted using an anonymized tool that addressed the core competencies and functions in the SQAO job description. SQAOs rated themselves on various sub-domains using a five-level scale which ranged from 'needing significant additional support' (1) to 'confident in delivering leadership performance' (5). When introducing the tool, the scale was explained clearly to avoid the positive skew that is often found in self-assessments.

The key finding that was repeated across almost all sub-domains and districts showed that, **although SQAOs are now confident they know what 'good' looks like in various areas of school performance, they are less confident about how to help move schools towards good practice, if not there already.** The following specific examples illustrate these observations, with SQAOs:

Confident reporting specific issues found at a single school but less so in relation to sharing good practices between schools or reporting trends across schools.

Confident giving actionable recommendations but less confident in their ability to influence behaviours and practices of school leaders to bring about change.

Confident using evidence to inform recommendations but need support to prioritise the most pressing recommendations and develop follow up processes to ensure their visits and recommendations lead to change.

Comfortable giving general guidance on pedagogy and use of lesson plans but less confident giving specific and detailed pedagogical support.

Becoming more confident on issues related to radical inclusion and safety but still need more support.

Several clear priorities for SQAO capacity development emerge from these findings, with a need help SQAOs:

Provide more practical, specific and prioritised feedback on improvement to schools. This could be done through scenario-based training, through discussion in learning circles, or even by making joint school visits.

Develop advocacy skills to help persuade schools of the benefits of the changes they are suggesting.

Improve follow up processes after school visits, perhaps through using remote supervision rather than additional physical visits.

Better record good practices and develop mechanisms for sharing between schools and with colleagues.

There is significant variation in the capability of SQAOs within the cadre so there are opportunities to identify those strongest in key areas and facilitate opportunities for peer learning and mentoring.

SQAO Process - A new external SQA form as part of reforms to the SQA system

Leh Wi Lan has been collaborating with MBSSE and the World Bank's FREE project to ensure that lessons learned from supporting SQAOs are incorporated into reforms to the school quality assurance system and the development of integrated internal and external school quality assurance processes. Leh Wi Lan supported FREE project consultants to revise and test a revised external school quality assurance form to be used by SQAOs during school visits. Key changes to this form included:

- Aligning the structure of internal and external school quality assurance tools for easier discussion between SQAO and school leaders.
- Building the tool around six quality domains or standards.
- Providing an evaluation rating system to be used for each domain.
- Reducing duplication in the current form relating to other data collection exercises.

The form was developed in November 2022 and introduced to SQAOs in December 2022. They used the revised form in January and February 2023 during school visits and were provided with a journal to log their reflections as they tested it. SQAOs met in their districts in February to discuss what they like about the new form and to suggest improvements.

Analysing the summary feedback from each district (see Figure 3), it can be seen that the SQAOs appreciated several of the changes made. What was even clearer was what they disliked about the new form. Almost all districts mentioned that it was too long, with too many questions, and too time consuming to complete.

Figure 3: What did SQAOs like about the new form?

Number of districts citing this aspect
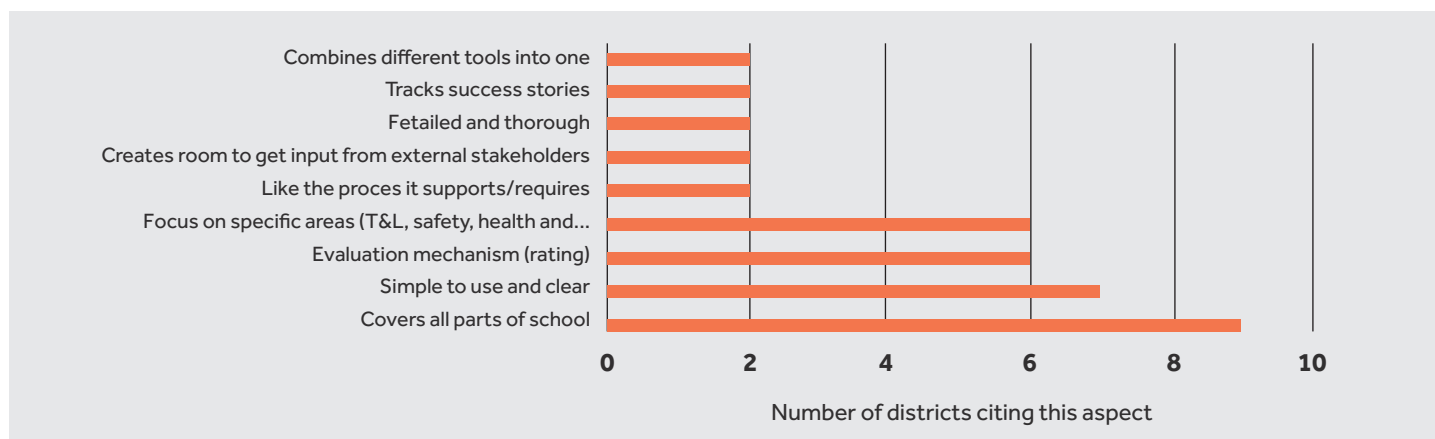
The general consensus was that this form was a marked improvement on the previous version – even before it had been used in collaboration with the internal school quality assurance tool. However, feedback from SQAOs has identified ways in which it can be further improved. These include:

• Reducing the number of questions.

• Improving the 'skip logic' to hide unnecessary questions based on previous answers.

• Keeping the rating approach to evaluation but improve (various suggestions).

• Resolving errors or inconsistencies in key questions.

• Enabling the use of photo/document evidence.

• Use the form as part of the SQAO annual performance.

Overall summary of the state of the SQAO cadre and pathways forward

The achievements and research findings presented in this paper show that substantial progress has been made in bridging the gap between schools and districts with the SQAOs who provide a mobile, flexible and professional quality assurance tier of support.

More schools are now receiving external visits, the quality of support is increasing, and the school-level data from these visits is enhancing evidence-based decision making across the system.

Peer-to peer capacity development processes have emerged and are growing in strength. Reforms are underway to better connect the SQAO function with school-level leadership and improvement activities and the dashboard helps inform the MBSSE about who needs support and who might be able to share their expertise.

While huge progress has been made, the SQAO cadre is still in its infancy and there is room for improvement. The capacity of SQAOs to support improvements in schools in critical areas such as pedagogy, safety and inclusion can be significantly increased. The forms they work with can be made more focused and less time-consuming, allowing SQAOs to spend more time and energy on the human interactions that guide improvements during school visits. The system that supports them can be made more effective so that necessary resources are provided, priority indicators are tracked, and SQAOs are recognised and held to account for what they do.

An effective SQAO cadre is essential to Sierra Leone's ability to sustain improvements in education. The investment made so far has established a strong foundation. Continued support will help realise the full potential of this layer of the system in the years ahead.