

Literacy and Life Skills Assessment of Syrian Youth (2021)

Summary report



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1. Why this study

The Syrian crisis has caused disruptions to children's and youth's education for over a decade. The COVID-19 pandemic, with the related school closures, has added an additional burden to the existing situation, impacting learning outcomes worldwide. **Assessing the status of Syrian youth's competencies in literacy, numeracy and life skills**, is essential in order to plan and implement better programmes to help them catch up on their learning losses. The ultimate goal is to support them to be able to go back into the main education streams or provide them with basic skills to cope with daily needs in their personal and professional environments.

Low literacy skills remain a critical concern globally. According to estimates from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, more than 617 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels (MPLs) in reading and mathematics¹. It may be noted that minimum proficiency levels are educational grade-based but assessed across age groups. For example, a youth aged 19 years may not possess minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics of grade 8 or even of grade 5 educational level, and so on. The 'Literacy and Life Skills Assessment of Syrian Youth' (LLASY) study measures Syrian youth's current literacy and numeracy levels and their life skills in terms of certain minimum proficiency levels.



¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Fact Sheet No. 46, September 2017 (UIS/FS/2017/ED/46).

2. Study target

The LLASY study has targeted the youth of Syria of the 15 to 24 age group currently living inside the country. The sample includes youth, female and male, who are enrolled in educational or training institutions, as well as those who are out of them. The latter category includes those in employment as well as those who are looking for jobs.

This target group is considered important for their potential to contribute to economic and social development. Strengthening their literacy, numeracy and life skills will add value to the human capital contribution to social and economic development.

Besides youth, the study has also targeted **educational and training institutions** as they are the providers of literacy, numeracy and life skills to the children and youth. This is provided via formal, non-formal and alternative pathways, including the designing, development and implementation of online programmes during closures of institutions, such as the ones witnessed during lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study's findings will also help develop suitable training modules for teachers in terms of curriculum development, pedagogy and leadership. This will enhance the quality and the impact of the teaching-learning situation in the educational interventions to put in place alternative learning programmes.

Besides the above, a sample of **households** were also targeted to get an idea of the background characteristics of the home environment, and observe causal factors that may contribute to the literacy and numeracy of youth. Some factors included were parents' income levels, parental literacy levels, availability of books, periodicals, and laptop and mobile phones with internet connection.

3. Methodology

LLASY was conducted between April and December 2021. The study has a defined target population of youth in Syria aged 15-24 years. The sample has been drawn from 13 governorates and 244 sub-districts.

The methodology adopted for the study is a two-stage cluster sampling as developed by WHO, where the first stage of the sampling is probability proportionate to size (PPS), and the second stage is randomly selected within each cluster. The sample size for assessment tests and the household survey was finalized as 420 households. In total, 56 sub-districts (clusters) were selected from 56 districts. Within each cluster, a sample was drawn randomly by the Centre for Educational Measurement and Evaluation, Ministry of Education. The study design was based on the existing information that Syrian youth selected, and fall under the categories of ‘in-school’, ‘out-of-school’, ‘currently working’ or ‘looking for job’. It is likely that the study may reveal a large variation in average scores and in the distribution of scores by governorates and demographic groups.

Furthermore, capturing the variation without seeing significant ceiling and floor effects in the proficiency distribution required that the test booklets cover the full range of proficiency.

The item development team was also asked to classify items into one of three groups:

- 1 Items that were appropriate for the age group of the youth taking the test;
- 2 Items that were too easy for the youth taking the test;
- 3 Items that were of medium difficulty or too difficult for the youth taking the test.

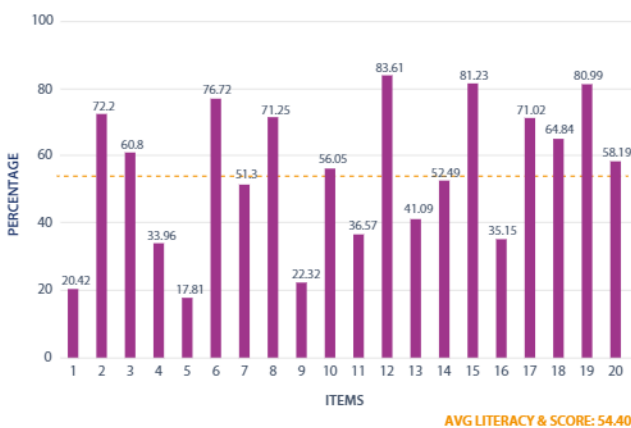
The study instruments consisted of tests and background questionnaires. The tests assessed the proficiency of youth in three cognitive domains of learning, i.e., i. literacy, ii. numeracy and iii. life skills. The cognitive process involved in the development of each domain and the construction of the proficiency scale which would measure the actual levels through tests were further elaborated to suit the needs of the study.

An important aspect of LLASY is that it has attempted to measure life skills, which is a core component of **SDG Target 4.7**, in addition to measuring literacy and numeracy falling under **SDG Target 4.6**. Information was also collected from 79 institutions teaching students at secondary, upper secondary, tertiary and TVET levels. There was a fair gender balance of the youth interviewed for collecting background information, with females accounting for 47.5% and males accounting for 52.5%.

4. Key findings

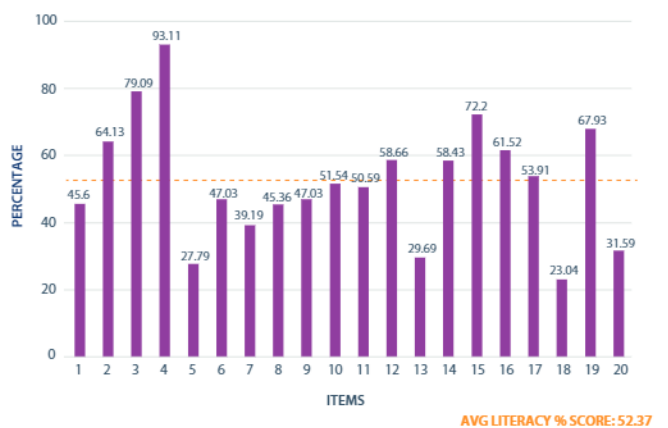
- 1 The overall performance of youth in literacy shows that a majority (54.4 percent) of youth meet the minimum expected competency levels (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of literacy scores



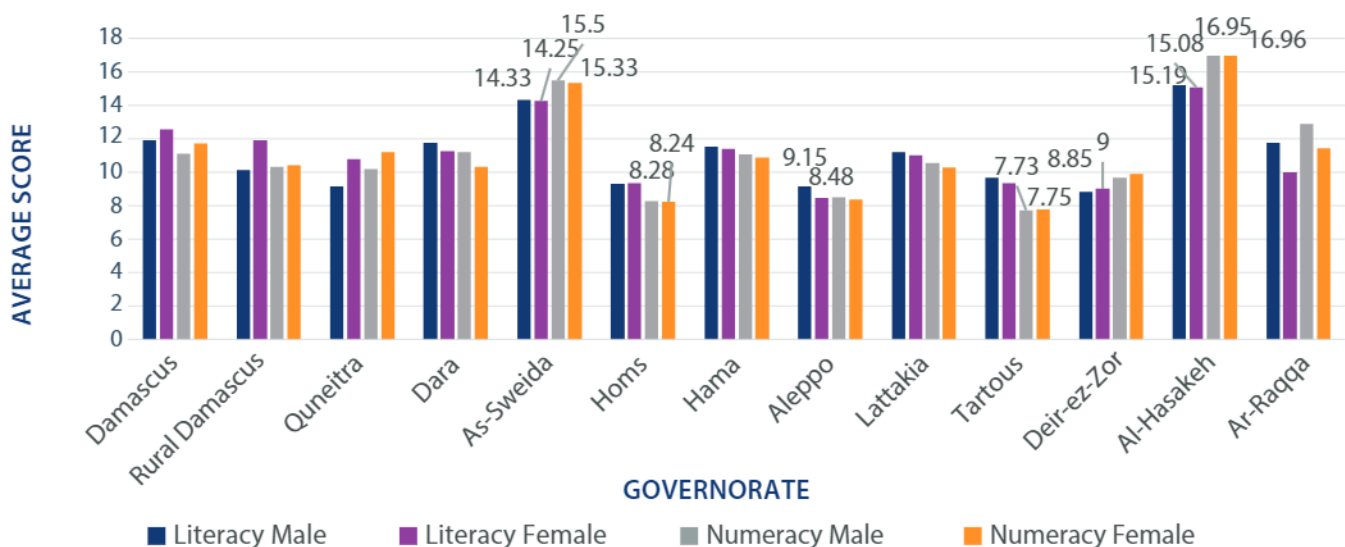
- 2 The overall performance of youth in numeracy is also promising, with 52.37 percent of youth meeting the minimum expected competency levels (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution of numeracy scores



- 3 The performance of both literacy and numeracy domains at the governorate level reveals a much wider gap between the high-performing and low-performing governorates.
- 4 At the governorate level, 8 out of 13 governorates have above average literacy scores compared to the national average, with Al-Hasakeh having the highest score, followed by As-Sweida.
- 5 Similarly, 7 out of 13 governorates have above average numeracy scores compared to the national average, Al-Hasakeh having the highest average score, followed by As-Sweida.
- 6 Among the better performing governorates in the study, the relative performance between literacy and numeracy is, in most cases, in favour of numeracy, for example- Al-Hasakeh, As-Sweida, Damascus and Lattakia.
- 7 Overall, both female and male youth have performed better in literacy than numeracy. However, the overall score for literacy is slightly higher for females than the overall percentage literacy score for males. For numeracy, it is slightly higher for males than for females.
- 8 The relative performance of youth in literacy and numeracy peaks at 21 years which is above the national average scores for literacy and numeracy. The increasing trend of scores by age is a positive aspect as older youth entering the labour market seem to be having adequate proficiency levels to meet the demands of the labour market.
- 9 The performance of youth achieving minimum competency levels in literacy and numeracy shows a distinct gap between rural and urban scores for both literacy and numeracy.
- 10 The overall performance of youth in the life skills test follows a similar pattern to the performance of literacy tests, with the overall mean score for youth being 58.45 percent.
- 11 The top performing and low performing governorates in life skills show a similar trend as seen in the cases of literacy and numeracy tests.
- 12 The life skills performance by rural and urban also follows a similar pattern as the literacy and numeracy performance, with the urban sample doing relatively better than the rural one.
- 13 The performance of youth on the life skills framework of life outcomes domain: employability is encouraging, with rural and urban youth scoring above the national mean score of 58.4 percent. Both urban and rural youth have performed well with regard to life outcome domain: active citizenship, with both categories of youth scoring above the national mean.
- 14 The performance of youth by gender is similar to the scenario for rural and urban performance, which also shows a positive indication of males and females doing relatively better in 2 out of 4 life outcome domains covering 6 out of 12 core skills.
- 15 The youth background survey has revealed that a large percentage of youth prefer science and maths compared to other subjects. This could be one of the reasons for the high percentage of youth scoring well on the numeracy test.

Figure 3. Performance of male and female youth by mean literacy and numeracy scores by governorates



5. Recommendations

- 1 The minimum proficiency levels achieved by Syrian youth looks promising despite the challenges they may face, especially in the rural areas and their economic situation. **Targeted programmes** such as alternative learning pathways and other non-formal education initiatives can go a long way in helping out-of-school youth gain the necessary literacy skills or improve their skills further. This in turn will give them better opportunities to find decent work and lead a better life.
- 2 While there are no major variations with regard to how male and female youth have performed in the assessment tests, there seems to be a significant difference in levels of performance between the governorates. Governorates such as Homs, Aleppo, Tartous, and Deir-es-Zor may need **more targeted interventions** through programmes for out-of-school youth and specific learning strategies developed for those in school to help achieve the expected competency levels of youth.
- 3 The wide gap in performance of rural and urban youth indicates that there is a **need to target literacy interventions more among rural youth**.
- 4 To understand the underlying contextual reasons for lower scores of rural youth, **qualitative studies may be undertaken to gather more information about the socio-economic context, quality of learning and other challenges to learning**.
- 5 Considering the performance of youth in the governorates, policymakers and programme planners may need to put in **more effort to target rural youth from lower-performing governorates** and develop special catch-up programmes to improve their overall literacy and numeracy competency levels.
- 6 The key takeaway for the performance of youth in life skills by location is that both rural and urban youth have done relatively better, including in 6 out of 12 core skills. More targeted interventions through **curricular development incorporating life skills content and activities that encourage the acquisition and use of life skills** in different contexts can be introduced as part of the learning process.
- 7 The background survey of youth has revealed that **many young people prefer science and maths compared to other subjects**. This is a positive sign from the employability angle as numeracy skill is an essential skill that requires complex cognitive functions and often poses a challenge for many learners in comparison to literacy skills.
- 8 The issues of **access to online facilities, the contents and quality of teaching**, and learners' interest levels need to be kept in view while considering remote learning as a mode for alternate learning programmes.
- 9 Youth indicated that the absence of a personal computer or laptop, followed by the absence of power, problems with mobile signals, financial difficulties, the non-availability of smartphones, and non-availability of TVs, were the main reasons for not attending online classes. Attending to household chores and having to go for work were other reasons unrelated to hardware and connectivity. **Hardware, connectivity, and flexible classes schedules are elements to be kept in mind** while considering remote learning as a mode for alternative learning programmes.



- 10 The core skills related to Active Citizenship/Learning to Live Together – which are also emphasized in SDG Target 4.7 – are critical. The study results have been very encouraging, with a high percentage of youth responding to the socio-emotional skills. This indicates that the life skills education components, in both formal and non-formal learning programmes in Syria, are having a positive impact on the learners. This may be further strengthened, especially for out of school youth seeking employment.
- 11 Institutions have given several reasons for students dropping out. While ‘finding job’ and ‘migration to another country or governorate’ can be looked at as plausible reasons for drop-outs, the other issues, such as ‘illness’, ‘repetition/failure’, and ‘taking care of family’, may need further attention from the angle of ensuring continuing, lifelong education for all. Suitable interventions such as medical help, counselling, and providing alternate pathways for continuing education appear warranted.
- 12 At the time of the survey, it has been reported that vaccination coverage with two doses against COVID-19 for all categories of respondents (i.e., students, teachers and staff) was at 9%, which is quite low. Since several new variants of COVID-19 are posing a threat of possibly spreading faster, it would be advisable to increase vaccination efforts, with two doses, in all the educational institutions that have re-opened.
- 13 In general, programmes targeting youth, who are in school or out of school, must review existing curriculum and pedagogical methods to improve the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process to ensure that the youth who are lagging in literacy skills are able to catch up and improve their overall competency levels.
- 14 More market-oriented skills must be introduced into alternative learning programmes and non-formal programmes targeting out-of-school youth.
- 15 Regular literacy assessments like LLASY must be conducted at regular intervals (about once every 3-5 years) to monitor the learning progress and study trends.
- 16 Create flexible learning pathways for youth to meet their educational needs and address the gap in current non-formal education programmes for youth.

Annex

LLASY findings:

Other contextual issues

Literate environment

From the literacy angle, the availability of a conducive literate environment is important for ensuring lifelong learning for all. The study has looked at three important aspects pertaining to this: parental literacy, reading habits of the youth, and availability of modern electronic gadgets at home. As for parental literacy, Figure 4 illustrates the situation.

Figure 4. Education levels of heads of households

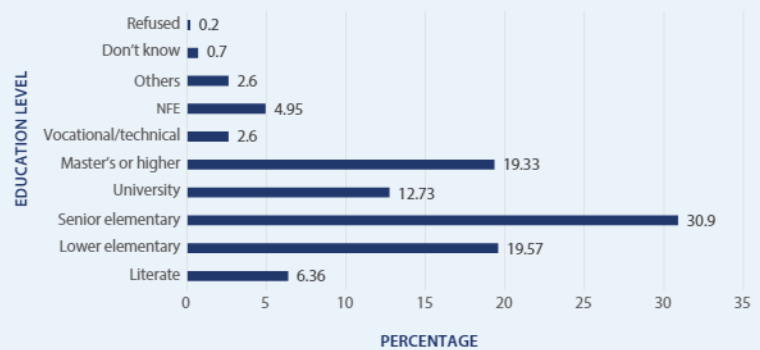
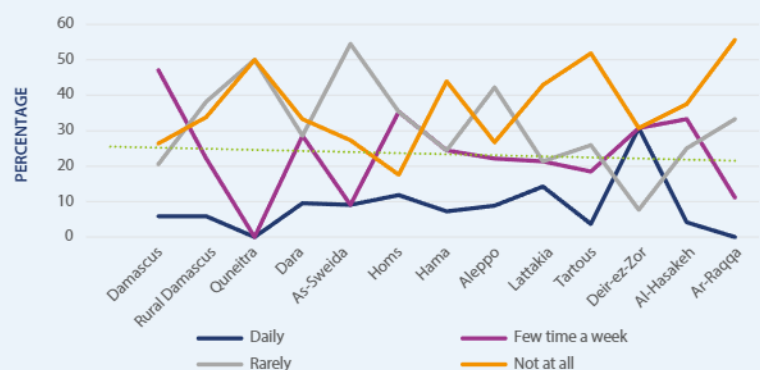


Figure 4 shows that heads of households with education levels of ‘senior elementary’, ‘university’ and ‘Masters or higher’ levels of education constitute 63% of the total sample, which is significant in terms of providing a conducive learning environment for children and youth belonging to such households.

Reading habits of the youth

Figure 5 illustrates the sample’s reading habits, and conveys that reading a few times a week constitutes a linear proportion trend of 20-30%.

Figure 5. Reading frequency of youth by governorates

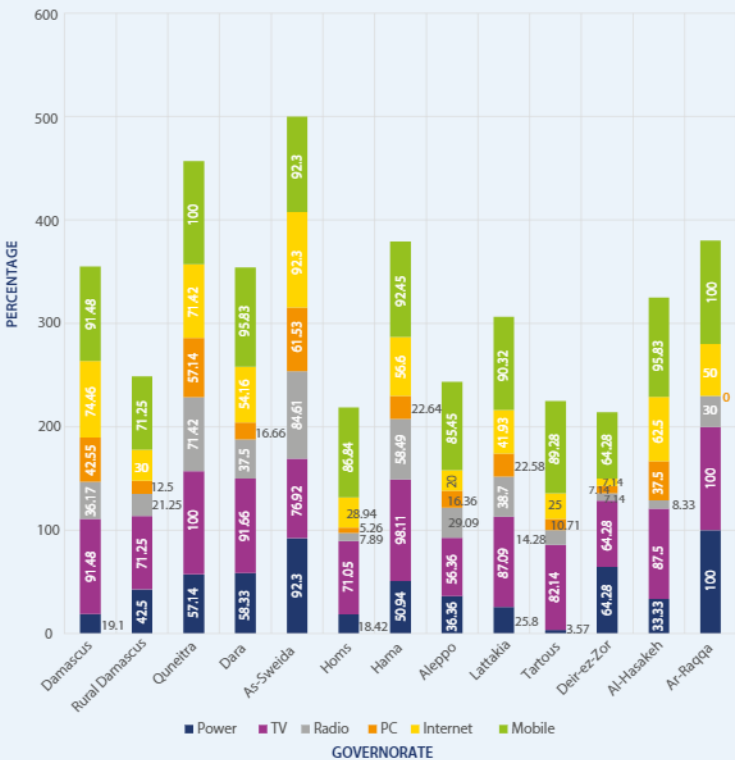


Availability of electronic facilities in the households

The availability of electronic facilities is important from the learners' perspective. It is relevant to the context of considering remote learning as an alternative learning pathway for the youth, particularly those 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET). But information on electronic facilities availability is important even for those in education: knowing more about the situation would be relevant for better assessing the impact of remote learning actions to prevent the learning loss during school closures (due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other reasons). The following chart illustrates the situation in the sample households.

It may be seen from Figure 6 that a very high proportion of households in all the governorates have reported the availability of mobile phones, ranging between 64 and 100 percent. The governorates of Quneitra and Ar-Raqqa have reported 100% availability, followed by the governorates of Damascus, Dara, As-Sweida, Latakia and Al-Hasakeh in the range of about 91 to 96 percent.

Figure 6. Availability of electronic facilities in the sample households

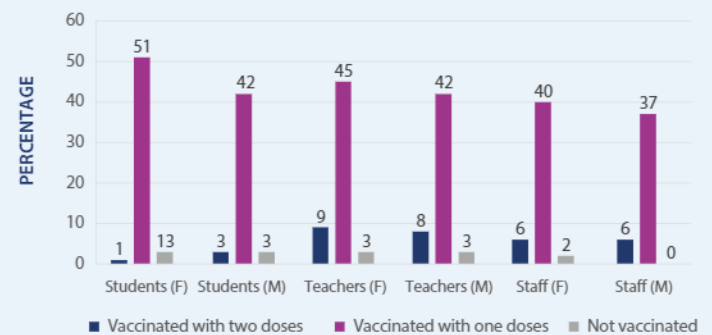


COVID-19 and its challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has massively disrupted education and has exacerbated the pre-existing global learning crisis. From an education point of view, one of the serious consequences of the pandemic has been the closure of schools, which has led to considerable learning loss among the students.

At the time of the survey (September-October 2021) vaccination coverage with two doses was quite low for all categories (see Figure 7). In all categories, the number of females getting vaccinated is comparatively more than that of males.

Figure 7. Status of vaccination against COVID-19²



Closure of institutions and conducting of online classes

Institutions closed during the pandemic have been reported as 67 (85%). The number of institutions conducting online classes has been reported as 12 (15%). The reasons for institutions not conducting online classes have been indicated as follows: A large proportion of institutions have attributed the reasons for not conducting online classes during the closure as 'power outage' (60 out of 79), 'no facility for developing digital content' (51 out of 79), and transmission and signal problems (46 and 45). Financial difficulties have been cited as the reason by 46 institutions.

These problems are seen from the institutions' perspective, as well as those reported from the youth perspective (especially, the use of mobile phones that have been reported as available in larger proportions) need to be addressed in order to ensure that in possible future lockdowns, online classes could be continued by all institutions.

² Based on the survey data collected during September-October 2021.



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The 'Literacy and Life Skills Assessment of Syrian Youth' (LLASY) study measures current literacy and numeracy levels, as well as life skills of the youth of Syria of the 15 to 24 age group currently living inside the country. The sample includes youth, female and male, who are enrolled in educational or training institutions, as well as those who are out of them.

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