

Colophon

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Work in progress: assessment in education. A developmental perspective on assessment in secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher education. Recommendation of the Education Council issued to the Minister and State Secretary of Education, Sciences and Cultural Affairs, dated November 2002.

The recommendation (in Dutch) can be ordered by using order number 20020386/589.

Summary of recommendation

Work in progress: assessment in education

A developmental perspective on assessment in secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher education

Educational assessment is a high-profile issue. The media regularly report on the so-called civil effects of examinations and alleged fraudulent practices. All educational sectors look at new forms of assessment in relation to current views on learning and the development of new learning routes. There are differences between the various educational sectors.

Advisory report perspective

The Education Council's advisory report outlines an integral perspective on assessment in secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher education. The report does not focus on a specific educational sector, although it does address the issue of assessment per sector. The Council formulates a developmental perspective on assessment that provides a basis for the development of initiatives across sectors and per sector. Since the

knowledge base for assessment in higher education is still limited, the Council does not make any specific recommendations for this sector but formulates general recommendations only.

The key question is:

How to develop a new assessment system for secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher education which on the one hand (better) fits the learner's educational career and on the other hand does justice to the demands imposed by society and the labour market?

The Council uses the civil effects criterion as the most important criterion in making choices regarding a new assessment system: the confidence that society, the post-compulsory sector and industry have in the learning achievements of the learner. The use of this criterion creates tensions, which the Council problematises through five themes.

Need for new assessment forms

Education should seek to respond to societal developments. Intended learning outcomes for a programme are increasingly described as competencies. Education providers attempt to create more real-life learning environments such as the "study house" and work place learning. Traditional forms of assessment no longer fit these new environments, which is why other testing practices such as portfolio assessment and continuous assessment are being explored. At present we are in a period of transition: from subject-focused and subject matter-focused learning approaches to competency-based learning approaches.

The situation in the educational sectors

The vocational education sector delivers a fair amount of workplace learning. This delivery model requires a review of the relationship between school and practice. Also, the sector is looking for people with non-traditional qualifications to enter the teaching profession (for example the so-called side-entrants). The secondary education sector faces the question to what extent new pre-vocational secondary level programmes and second phase programmes will require new forms of assessment. The higher education sector 'wrestles' with the value of the vwo-certificate (the school leaving diploma that prepares pupils for entry into higher education), with the introduction of the bachelors and masters structure and with its own assessment practices.

Sectoral discussions of new forms of learning and assessment are not sufficiently focused. The differences between sectors are even greater. Developments across sectors should be aligned so as to promote progression opportunities. Increasingly, the need for a common 'language' within and across sectors is being recognised. The same is true for a common language to communicate with clients.

Mix of methods

There is not one way to assess learning. There is no 'best method'. All new forms of assessment have a 'weak link'. Since the weak link is not always located in the same place, a mix of assessment tools would be preferable. A mix of methods also generates more information. Traditional instruments should continue to be available but used mainly for diagnostic purposes. The more traditional assessment techniques should be partly replaced or complemented by other assessment methods.

Themes within the development of new assessment forms
The Council reaches conclusions on five themes.

Purposes of assessment

- Selective exams - adaptive exams: there should be less emphasis on selection in pre-vocational secondary education and in levels 1 and 2 of secondary vocational education than in higher-level programmes.
- Learning process - learning outcomes: exams should play a more important role in fostering educational improvements and innovations.

Division of responsibility

- Formal responsibility - actual responsibility: responsibilities should be adjusted to suit new assessment practices.
- Contextualised assessment - decontextualised assessment: contextualised assessment tasks should be used more widely in pre-vocational secondary education, secondary vocational education and higher professional education.

Positioning

- Learning path-independent exams - learning path-dependent exams: greater emphasis should be placed on learning path-independent exams in educational programmes at the higher levels.
- Instruction – assessment: there should be a greater separation between instruction and assessment functions (with the exception of pre-vocational secondary education and secondary vocational education levels 1 and 2).
- Retrospective assessment – prospective assessment: there should be more focus on the assessment of intended learning outcomes.
- Standardisation – destandardisation: standardisation and transparency in assessment practice should be improved.

Exam content and exam administration

- Subject knowledge – competencies: competency-based curricula and competency-based assessments should be adopted more widely.
- Absolving exams – integrative exams: integrative exams should be used more widely alongside absolving exams.

Practical matters

- The Council advocates a comprehensive exploration of new assessment forms in relation to a programme or a curricular innovation process.

Development options across educational sectors

Progression routes

Progression from pre-vocational secondary education to secondary vocational education to professional higher education requires a process-oriented approach to learning pathways that allow for flexible entry and exit points. Nationally agreed standards will safeguard the civil effects of exams. A transition to a more competency-based educational system may have a positive effect on progression routes across sectors.

Meeting the needs of society and the demands of the labour market

National assessment standards, developed in consultation with clients and laid down by the government, may enhance trust in diplomas. Increased public trust may discourage the post-compulsory sector and branches from administering entrance exams and developing branch

qualifications on top of existing diplomas. Such extra 'caesuras will negatively impact the civil effects of diplomas and reduce accessibility.

Client involvement is easier to achieve for the vocational education sector than for the general secondary education sector ('havo/vwo'). It may be advisable to first introduce new assessment forms into vocational education. In view of the drop-out problem which is most acute in pre-vocational secondary education, the preferential order would be: 1. pre-vocational secondary education; 2. secondary vocational education; 3. higher professional education.

Since the general education sector prepares pupils for follow-up study, it should undertake the process of establishing learning competencies, social competencies and student competencies. This process may be embarked on as part of the broad operationalisation of the competency concept in the entire education sector. It is important that the sector does not miss out on this opportunity.

Recommendations for the secondary education sector
The Council recommends that:

- the purposes of assessment for problem groups are reviewed.

For the pre-vocational secondary education sector the purposes of assessment should be reviewed in light of the dropout issue. Assessment may well fulfil other purposes in this sector, particularly in the basic vocationally-focused learning pathway. The provision of structure and feedback and the recognition of learning efforts should be given greater emphasis than selection.

The learning goals formulated for the basic vocationally-focused learning pathway may be retained, but it should be made possible to award diplomas that recognise achievement in completing a few subjects only. Diplomas will indicate learning efforts and learning achievements, which may prevent dropout. The pupil may retake failed components at a later stage.

- learning competencies and social competencies are assessed.

In addition to academic learning, pupils of pre-vocational secondary schools and non-vocational secondary schools acquire social skills and knowledge and learn how to learn, outside the school context as well. To date, knowledge and skills in these areas have not been described as learning outcomes and are thus not assessed.

The educational sectors are seeking to design and implement school exams which also assess learning competencies and social competencies. Assessment practices should focus on issues such as learning capacity and the exercise of initiative. Integrative testing is preferable: the assessment of knowledge, skills, learning competencies and social competencies through the use of an integrated assignment. After all, learning competencies and social competencies cannot be acquired without context, but need to be integrated into subject areas. The same holds true for the assessment of these competencies. Integrative testing may also help ease exam pressures. Assessment practices are not separate from but integrated into the central end-of-school examinations.

- the backwash effects of exams is strengthened.

Educational innovation should lead to innovation in assessment practices. New forms of assessment should be introduced into the second phase. However, the 'study house' has not led to the development of innovative assessment practices. The theory-oriented and detailed learning goals formulated for the second phase do not promote new assessment methods. Each profile should seek to include a limited number of skills, thus creating increased cohesion in the educational programme and a more systematic approach to the profiles and their end products. This requires a careful analysis of the profiles in relation to further learning and societal functioning.

In pre-vocational secondary education traditional assessment forms impede educational innovation. Recent developments such as the work-based learning model do not synchronise with current assessment practises. There is a need for integrated assessment of theoretical and practical learning. Integrated assessment tasks may help remove the boundaries between general and vocationally oriented subjects.

Recommendations for the secondary vocational education sector
The Council recommends that:

- differentiated diplomas are introduced for the pathways of vocational learning and on-the-job learning.

The vocational learning pathway and the on-the-job learning pathway both lead to the same diploma. Though not identical, these pathways are of equal value. Is this equality justified? The two groups of learners do not acquire the same skills, which results in differences in labour market prospects. Differentiated diplomas for vocational learning and on-the-job learning will offer employers better insight into the acquired skills.

- stronger links are forged between school-based learning and work-based learning.

Practice-based assessments should become part of the overall assessment structure. Integrative testing of theoretical and practical learning is preferable. Clients should become partners as well.

- assessment purposes are reviewed in relation to a learner's educational career.

The purposes of assessment should be tied to a learner's educational career. An integrated set of related assessment tasks (a portfolio, for example) may further enhance this career.

Concurrently with this advisory report the Council publishes the study *Competencies: from complications to compromise*. With this study the Council hopes to contribute to the application of the competency concept in all educational sectors.