

Tailored approaches within the statutory frameworks: final assessment as a benchmark for primary and secondary education

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The education system is increasingly expected to take account of the differences between school pupils. Schools and teachers can do this in very different ways. The approaches taken by primary and secondary schools must respect the statutory frameworks, which do allow a certain amount of variety. For instance, primary school pupils can perform their final assessments before the eighth school year, and secondary school pupils can sit exams in extra subjects, complete subjects one or two years earlier, or sit exams at a higher level for one or more subjects. In recent years, various proposals have been made to make more variety possible in final assessments.

The Education Council recommends that the statutory frameworks relating to final assessment should not be broadened. In the current education system, the final assessment in primary and secondary education forms an important benchmark. It is necessary to guarantee the fundamental nature of this education and to monitor its quality. Meddling with the statutory frameworks for final assessments will have an impact on the system as a whole. The Education Council envisages a number of risks. Broadening the statutory frameworks could increase social inequality among school pupils and create obstacles to access to and progression within the system. It may also have a detrimental impact on the civil value of diplomas. In other countries, a more flexible approach to final assessment often results in additional requirements and additional testing at the next level of education. In the Dutch system it might motivate and challenge pupils to improve performance, but may also result in a decrease of performance.

The Education Council believes that it is important that teachers and schools take account of the differences between pupils. The Education Council has observed that schools have a great deal of leeway within the statutory frameworks for final assessment to cope with the differences between pupils. The fact that schools have so far made relatively little use of this scope is partly due to real, practical considerations. Obstacles within the system include: uncertainty about the way the next level of education values extra efforts by the pupil (i.e., extra subjects, subjects at a higher level), mismatches between the curricula of differing school types, organisational complications, and high demands on the capacity of teachers to differentiate. Broadening of the statutory frameworks for final assessment would not remove any of these obstacles.

The Education Council emphasises that little knowledge is available on the possible consequences of a further broadening of the statutory frameworks for final assessment. As a result, the risks are unknown. With this advisory report, the Education Council warns against making ill-considered and rushed changes to the system.