Chapter 2

Student assessment in Romania: Putting learning at the centre

This chapter looks at how Romania’s assessment system measures and shapes student learning. Assessment in Romania is characterised by a strong focus on external testing, which limits the space for teachers’ professional judgement and student feedback that are essential for learning. Romania can rebalance its assessment system by strengthening learning standards so that they support classroom and external assessment to be aligned with the new curriculum. It will also be critical to invest in teachers’ assessment literacy, and give them room to exercise it. The high stakes attached to external examinations makes it essential to improve their quality to create a fairer basis for selection and encourage broader learning across the curriculum. Achieving these changes will require increasing the resources available for assessment and examination design and support.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.
Introduction

Student assessment represents a key policy lever for improving the educational experiences of students and the quality of schooling. When an education system achieves the right balance between different types of assessment, and all assessment practices are oriented towards supporting student learning, classrooms are characterised by a positive assessment culture. Students are fully engaged with their learning and contribute to the planning and evaluation of lessons. Teachers provide differentiated learning experiences and high-quality feedback. Over time, students learn to assess their own progress and take greater control of their own learning, establishing strong foundations for lifelong learning (OECD, 2013d). In a balanced assessment system, schools, government and the public also have access to the data they need to assure them of the system’s effectiveness and to point to areas for improvement. Assessment data can also show whether particular groups of students are not achieving as well as other groups, helping the system to achieve higher levels of equity.

Romania recognises the importance of assessment and in recent years has sought to develop a wider range of assessment practices as part of its efforts to improve student learning. However, it has yet to achieve the balance between summative practices (assessment of learning) and formative practices (assessment for learning) that defines a positive assessment culture. The focus on academic excellence in high-stakes examinations at pivotal moments of a student’s school career creates little space for personalised feedback and individualised learning, with implications for students’ outcomes and motivation to learn. Standardised national assessments are intended to help teachers identify each child’s learning needs, but because teachers get little support to improve their own assessment literacy, the new assessments’ value for teaching and learning has been limited. The implementation of Romania’s new school curriculum, which puts student engagement in learning at its centre, represents an opportunity to rethink assessment practices in Romania so that they support higher levels of achievement and inclusion.

For this to happen, Romania will need to make some changes. Strengthening the curriculum’s learning standards, and ensuring that they are used as the key reference point for national examination and assessment development and teachers’ classroom practices, will provide the foundations to ensuring assessment supports the new student-centred vision for learning. Aligning assessment practice with the new curriculum will also mean reviewing Romania’s high-stakes national examinations, including reconsidering the use of the Grade 8 examination for tracking students into different streams. In the immediate term, there is a pressing need to mitigate the negative impact of the Grade 8 examination on student learning and equity. In the medium term, a full review of secondary education pathways and certification could help to create a more comprehensive education system where students have equal learning opportunities and teachers have the space to focus on assessment for learning rather than external summative examinations.

Investing in capacity will be critical to achieving these changes. Initial and continuing teacher education need to focus on developing teachers’ assessment literacy, including practising formative assessment. Changes in assessment practice will not happen without stronger pedagogical skills and teachers need to be given the room and support they need to develop their professional judgement and capacity to give feedback on student learning. Finally, the National Centre for Assessment and Examinations (NCAE) must be adequately resourced so that it has the specialist assessment expertise to develop high-quality, reliable
national examinations and assessments, and support the further modernisation of Romania’s assessment system. While improving the student assessment system will require investment, the reward would be significantly better outcomes for all Romania’s students.

Context and main features of student assessment in Romania

The policy framework for student assessment

Objectives and guiding principles

The framework for student assessment in Romania is set out in the 2011 Education Law, which states that the purpose of student evaluation is to “guide and optimise” pupil learning. According to the law, assessment should evaluate student competence, and the results should be used to provide feedback to students and generate individualised learning plans. This approach, making student learning and development the fundamental goals of assessment, is positive. It is in line with the direction of reform in most OECD countries, which are placing increased emphasis on the formative role of assessment as a means to improve teaching practice and raise learning outcomes (OECD, 2013d).

Yet there is a gap between these intentions and implementation. The law introduced a diagnostic teacher evaluation of student learning in the Preparatory Grade, and national diagnostic assessments in Grades 2 and 6 as a means to support improvements in assessment practice. To be able to effectively use diagnostic assessment to develop differentiated teaching and learning, teachers need to have a clear understanding of national learning expectations and of how to evaluate student progress towards these. However, this is a challenge in Romania. Part of the reason for the introduction of the new national assessments was the perceived inaccuracy of teachers’ classroom-based assessments. The new centrally designed national assessments were intended to help teachers assess students against common standards and provide more robust measures of individual student learning. However, the lack of an accompanying strategy that supports teachers in using the assessments to inform their classroom practice and understanding of national learning expectations, means that they have had little impact on the reliability of teachers’ classroom assessment practice so far.

At the same time, the national assessments were also intended to inform the development of more student-led learning, with teachers using the results to develop individual student learning plans. However, the lack of support for teachers on how to provide feedback to students and adapt their teaching approaches to learners’ needs means that the assessments have not contributed to encouraging differentiated learning as well as they might. At present, in most schools they are perceived as an instrument for central reporting rather than a tool to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

Moreover, the 2011 law did not reform the Grade 8 examination, which determines which upper secondary school students attend. The high stakes attached to this examination, as well as its design, pose a significant obstacle to the introduction of the more student-focused assessment practices envisaged by the law.

Alignment between assessment and the curriculum

Like many OECD and European Union (EU) countries, Romania is currently reforming its curriculum to focus on the development of competencies. This marks a significant shift from the current curriculum, which focuses on the acquisition of theoretical content knowledge, towards a broader approach to learning that seeks to
develop students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes, and their ability to draw on these resources in different contexts. The new curriculum is based on the EU’s eight key competencies for lifelong learning that cut across different domain areas, such as learning to learn, digital competence and a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship (Box 2.1). The new curriculum also emphasises the importance of student-led learning.

### Box 2.1. Incorporating competence into national curricula

In recent years, countries in the OECD and beyond have incorporated competence into their national curricula, with the aim of developing students’ ability to draw on all their individual resources to respond to the demands of different, real-life contexts (OECD, 2005b). This focus on competency development is based on the belief that in the modern economy, the acquisition of knowledge is no longer sufficient. In fact, the availability of information means that some skills that have traditionally been the focus of classroom teaching, like being able to recall facts, may now be less important than the ability to interpret information, communicate effectively, think critically and creatively, and collaborate with others to solve challenges in different situations.

In recognition of this change the EU set out eight key competencies which it believes are necessary for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in the modern knowledge economy. These are: 1) communication in the mother tongue; 2) communication in a foreign language; 3) mathematical competence and basic competencies in science and technology; 4) digital competence; 5) learning to learn; 6) social and civic competence; 7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and 8) cultural awareness and expression. Each of the competencies incorporates knowledge, skills and attitudes. The EU has also set out transversal skills that are relevant to all of the competencies such as critical thinking, creativity and initiative. Member states are expected to provide initial education and training systems that support the development of these competencies for the lifelong learning of their citizens.

At the same time, countries beyond the EU have also reoriented their curricula around competence. New Zealand revised its curriculum in 2007 around five competencies: 1) thinking; 2) using language, symbols and text; 3) managing self; 4) relating to others; and 5) participating and contributing. In Canada, all jurisdictions have reoriented their curricula to focus on problem solving and cognitive application of knowledge using higher-order skills. Many Australian states have also developed competency standards and frameworks, and the Australian curriculum includes a set of general capabilities that cover knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions.

Countries have taken different approaches to integrating competence into their curricula and education system. Within the EU, some countries have framed the competencies in relation to specific subjects, as in Bulgaria, Italy and Portugal, while in Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Luxembourg the competencies are framed as the development of personal qualities. Countries have also had to decide which levels of education the competencies apply to. In some countries, such as in Estonia, Finland, and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland in the United Kingdom, they cover the whole school system. In others, some of the key competencies apply to a single level of the education system like primary or lower secondary education, as in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and England in the United Kingdom.
Box 2.1. Incorporating competence into national curricula (continued)

There are also differences in how countries express expectations for student learning according to the competencies. National curricula usually set out expected learning outcomes but with differing degrees of detail. Some countries have developed detailed standards for student learning that clearly specify what students should know and be able to do at different stages of the learning process.

Others have taken a more decentralised approach that leaves more freedom at the local or school level. For example, Spain’s core curriculum sets out the key competencies that all learners should develop by the end of compulsory education, providing regions with the basis to develop their own more detailed curricula for each school level, cycle, year, area and subject.


Romania’s Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) has developed the framework for the new curriculum which draws on the key competencies identified by the EU Reference Framework for Lifelong Learning (OJEU, 2006). The framework sets out the outcomes expected at the end of each cycle of education (pre-school, primary, lower secondary, compulsory and upper secondary education). There are also detailed descriptors of the key competencies at elementary, functional and developed levels which are aligned to the end of Grades 4, 10 and 12. The individual curriculum for each grade is being implemented progressively. The Preparatory Grade through to Grade 4 were implemented by the end of 2015, and the lower secondary curriculum will be progressively implemented, starting with Grade 5 in the academic year 2017/18.

On paper, the focus on competence-based student-led learning in the curriculum seems well supported by the aspirations of the assessment system as set out in the 2011 Education Law. In practice, the alignment is less clear. At the Preparatory Grade, teachers seem to be relatively well informed about the expected outcomes of the curriculum and prepared on how to scaffold student learning towards these outcomes through continuous assessment and support. In other grades, however, insufficient attention has been paid to explaining to teachers the significance of a competence-based approach to assessment and providing them with relevant support. In the absence of a national training programme on the new curriculum, there have only been some county-level initiatives to address teachers’ needs in teaching the new curriculum. Moreover, while the Grades 8 and 12 examinations remain unreformed and continue to assess theoretical knowledge, they are likely to limit the impact of the curriculum changes on teaching and learning in classrooms. The experience of other systems is clear; unless the assessment system changes to reflect the new curriculum, teaching practice and classroom experience will not change.
Practices for student assessment

Romania uses a combination of national examinations and national assessments (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. National examinations and national assessments in public schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Existence of national examinations</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Lower secondary</th>
<th>Upper secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five or more subjects covered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or four subjects covered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or two subjects covered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit, but number of subjects covered is unavailable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No examination or no assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Number of subjects covered in the assessment framework (subjects may be tested on a rotation basis).


Romanian students experience extensive testing. Tests include national assessments and examinations as well as classroom-based assessments and, for some cohorts, participation in international assessments (Figure 2.2). In Romania, students from a linguistic minority may also receive education in their mother tongue, in which case they are required to take a supplementary test in the language and literature of their minority language for the Grades 8 and 12 national examinations.

Figure 2.2. National assessments and examinations in Romania
National assessments

The 2011 Education Law introduced a teacher evaluation in the Preparatory Grade and national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 for the first time. It also introduced a system-monitoring assessment in Grade 4. Before that, a system-monitoring, sample-based test was conducted in Grade 4 approximately every three years between 1995 and 2008. There are no “stakes” for the student associated with any of these assessments, and they have no bearing on passage to the next grade.

All the assessments are designed by the NCAE based on the national curriculum (Table 2.1). The NCAE also provides guidelines and reporting templates for marking, which takes place at school level. Each school provides the assessment results to the NCAE via an electronic platform. The NCAE produces a national report that describes how the items were developed and the matrix on which each exam was based. They also provide data on the number of candidates and a breakdown of the marks for each question. Performance is broken down by rural and urban areas, but not by gender or socio-economic status. The national reports are public documents and are published online.

The Preparatory Grade

The Preparatory Grade was integrated into compulsory primary education in 2012. The change was designed to improve the transition to primary education amid concerns that many children started late and/or with very different levels of readiness to learn, contributing to poor engagement and high rates of dropping out. Approximately three-quarters of teachers working at this grade have been supported by continuing professional development associated with this change. A small-scale analysis of the implementation of this new stage of compulsory education reported improved engagement between teachers and parents on children’s learning as a result of the change (Langa, 2015).

Grades 2 and 6

The assessments introduced at the end of Grades 2 and 6 are intended to support more individualised student learning, with their results contributing to the development of individual learning plans. The results of the Grade 6 examination are also supposed to help begin guiding students to an appropriate high school. However, teachers have received little support to enable them to use the results in this way. There is no national policy or guidance available on the development of the individualised learning plans, and there is little evidence that the assessment results are being used to diagnose students’ learning needs.

Grade 4

According to the 2011 Law the Grade 4 assessment is a system-monitoring assessment at the end of primary education across a sample of students. However, the design, format and marking of the assessment are very similar to the other national assessments. Also, like the other national assessments, all students in public schools take the assessment. The decision to extend it to the full cohort was based on the desire to have student results consistently available across all grades when a national assessment is conducted. It also reflected concerns about the accuracy of teachers’ classroom-based assessment.
Table 2.1. National assessments in Romania

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers complete assessment reports at the end of the school year in May, on the basis of continuous assessment throughout the school year.</td>
<td>First conducted in its current form in 2014/15 academic year. Assessment at the end of the academic year.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
<td>System-monitoring</td>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is assessed</td>
<td>Full cohort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is assessed</td>
<td>Physical, social, emotional development; language and communication skills; attitudes to learning.</td>
<td>Writing, reading and mathematics.</td>
<td>Romanian language and communication; a first foreign language; mathematics and sciences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format of assessment</td>
<td>Child’s teacher complete the report template provided by NCAE.</td>
<td>Written test designed by NCAE. Includes multiple-choice, closed-format short answer and some open-ended writing tasks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking</td>
<td>Assessment conducted by child’s classroom teacher following NCAE guidelines. No moderation or external marking.</td>
<td>Marked in the school by the students’ classroom teacher and another teacher who is not the child’s regular teacher. Marking follows guidelines based on qualitative descriptors set out in coding guides provided by NCAE.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading</td>
<td>No grade is provided. Report indicates if a competency has been fully developed, or is still being developed.</td>
<td>No grade is provided. Results indicate the question answered correctly, partially correctly or incorrectly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>Parents receive a copy of the teacher’s assessment report.</td>
<td>Parents and students receive a two page report setting out questions answered correctly, partially correctly and incorrectly, and a short descriptive text on the skills that have been mastered and those which were not fully mastered.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use</td>
<td>To help optimise and individualise student learning, and parental engagement. Currently no central use of the results. A national report based on the qualitative analysis of these reports is planned by the NCAE for 2016/17.</td>
<td>To support the development of individualised learning plans at the classroom level. The results are used to develop a public national report for each assessment annually.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**National examinations**

Romania has two high-stakes national examinations: the Grade 8 examination and the baccalaureate taken in Grade 12, which are both developed by the NCAE. Following the creation of the NCAE in 1998 there has been significant progress in improving the quality, reliability and fairness of these examinations. Prior to 2011, there were widespread reports of cheating in the national examinations. In 2011 cameras were
introduced to examination rooms for the baccalaureate to prevent cheating and in 2012 they were extended to the Grade 8 examination. Improvements in marking practices have also helped to increase the reliability of national examinations. Since 2015, scripts are marked exclusively by teachers in a different county to where the examination took place. The NCAE also provides teacher training programmes to ensure consistency in marking prior to examinations.

Despite these important improvements in the examinations, their high stakes leads to a strong focus on examination content that limits the breadth and depth of teaching and learning. Their high stakes for individual students also narrows educational pathways at an early age, creating inequities and limiting students’ ability to develop their full potential.

It is notable that Romania does not have any national test, examination, or qualification at the end of compulsory education, in Grade 10. This reflects frequent changes to the structure of the education system. Prior to 1999, when compulsory education was eight years, the Grade 8 examination at the end of lower secondary also marked the end of compulsory education. However since 1999 compulsory education has been extended to 9, then 10, and later 11 years, but no leaving examination or qualification has been introduced at this stage. The positioning of Grade 9 has also been the subject of much debate and there has been discussion about moving it to lower secondary. The lack of a leaving qualification at the end of compulsory education and the placing of Grade 9 remains under discussion.

Grade 8 examination

The Grade 8 examination is the first test Romanian students take that carries explicit stakes. While there has historically been an examination at the end of Grade 8, the examination in its current form was first introduced in 1999 to certify student learning at the end of lower secondary education to the same national standards for all students. It replaced the individual entrance exams which had previously been set by the different high schools (OECD, 2003).

- **Purpose:** certifies individual student learning to access one of three broad categories of high school: theoretical, vocational and technological high schools. A student score is calculated based on the results of their Grade 8 examination, which currently contributes 75%, (and from 2017, 80%) of the student score. A student’s average marks for Grades 5-8 including marks for attendance and behaviour account for the remaining 25%, (and from 2017, 20%). Along with students’ individual choices, this final score is used to assign students to a high school and the type of programme that they will follow. The process of allocation is computer based.

- **Design:** a test of Romanian language and literature and mathematics. According to the 2011 Education Law, the examination was also intended to assess natural sciences, foreign language and social and civic skills but the decisions on extending assessment to these domains have been deferred pending the introduction of the new curriculum. The examination requires students to complete a range of multiple choice, closed-format short answers and some open-ended writing tasks.

- **Reporting and use:** until 2010, the NCAE produced a national report on the Grade 8 exam results. Since 2010 the Grade 8 results have been reported alongside the baccalaureate results in the State of Education report published annually by the
Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research (MNESR). Data on the number of candidates, the distribution of marks, and the pass rate by county and rural/urban area are provided. The NCAE plans to produce national reports on Grade 8 results in the future.

Grade 12 examination

The Grade 12 baccalaureate examination is now frequently the only examination that students take to enter higher education. Previously, although students needed to pass the baccalaureate to enter higher education, there was a belief that its marking was unreliable, and that the examination was unable to sufficiently distinguish between student ability levels or evaluate capacity for future learning. This led to higher education institutions organising their own separate entrance examinations. Such double testing was inefficient and created inequities in the standards that different institutions required (OECD, 2000). Today, although students must take a further entrance test in addition to the baccalaureate to enter some faculties and institutions, it is far less widespread than before.

• **Purpose:** the Grade 12 baccalaureate exam is a school graduation examination and is required to enter university.

• **Design:** all students take: an oral examination in Romanian; a test in a modern foreign language with the results aligned to the European Framework of Reference for Languages; an assessment in computer skills to access the European Computer Driving Licence in digital competencies; and a written test in the Romanian language and literature. Students then take different options according to the course of study. For example, students in theoretical high schools following a science programme take an examination in mathematics and an examination in sciences while those following a humanities programme take an examination in history and an examination in either geography or another social sciences or humanities subject based on their own choice. Students in vocational and technological high schools also take an examination(s) focused on their areas of specialisation.

The original 2011 law aimed to introduce more trans-disciplinary examinations but implementation has been postponed, in anticipation of the revision of the Grade 12 examination when the new curriculum is implemented.

• **Reporting and use:** students must pass the baccalaureate to enter tertiary education. While students in all high schools can take the baccalaureate, there is significant variation in the pass rate. In 2013, 80% of graduates from theoretical high schools and 73% of graduates from “vocational” high schools passed the examination, but only 38% of technology high school graduates did so. There is also significant variation in pass rates across counties and between urban and rural areas. In 2014, 59% of students in rural high schools who sat the baccalaureate were successful compared with 76% of students living in urban areas (MNESR, 2014b)

As with the Grade 8 results, the Grade 12 results are reported in the State of Education report. Data on the number of candidates, distribution of marks, results by county, urban/rural area, type of high school and gender are provided. No breakdown of results by socio-economic status is provided.
Classroom assessment

In Romanian schools there is a well-established practice of evaluating student progress in all subjects, and recording results in a record or index that informs students’ final grade for the year. These results determine student progression to the next grade, although in practice very few students repeat a grade. In lower secondary education they also influence the high school a student attends by contributing to a student’s final mark for Grade 8.

In the first four years of schooling, students’ work, homework or class tests are scored on a four-point scale (very good, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory). At the end of the semester or grade, these marks are used to calculate the semester or grade average mark. Such assessments are known as “qualifiers” – they are given status in relation to the end of semester mark. This orientation of scoring towards the final semester mark is noteworthy. It means that assessment is always focused on the next task or test (how to do better in the next task, even though the next task will be different) rather than on looking at work done and seeing how it could have been better. While this assessment practice is often referred to in Romania as formative assessment, there is little emphasis on feedback to students on their own learning, a key feature of formative assessment as generally understood (see Policy Issue 2.3).

In secondary education, scoring is on a ten-point numeric scale, with ten being the highest mark. Five is the passing mark. As in the earlier stages of schooling, marks awarded across the semester are used to generate an end of semester average, but from Grades 5-8 there is also an important yearly average grade. A student’s yearly average mark from Grades 5-8 make up 25% (and from 2017, 20%) of the total mark for Grade 8 that is used, together with student choice and the Grade 8 examination results, for selection to high school. This means that at least some of the high stakes associated with the Grade 8 examination also influence classroom assessment throughout lower secondary education.

In the past, results from national examinations have revealed a significant gap between teacher assessments and the actual knowledge and skills of students, with teachers’ classroom assessment marks seemingly inflated in relation to students’ national examination results. In response to this, the 2011 Education Law sought to improve the reliability of classroom assessments and teachers’ assessment practices, by providing an external measure of student learning through the new national assessments.

Use of results

Tracking into different schools

The results of the Grade 8 exam are used to direct students to different upper secondary pathways, or “track” them, as this process is known. These pathways in Romania are particularly diverse, and include theoretical high schools and “vocational” schools (actually academic schools with a focus on arts, sports, theology or the military) that attract students who aspire to university. Another separate option is the technological high schools. The majority of students enrol in theoretical and technological schools. While technological schools are classified as “vocational” in reality they comprise a wide variety of different school types, most of which offer few of the features associated with high-quality vocational education and training (VET), such as opportunities for work-based learning. Improving the quality of training available in these schools is a national policy priority (see Chapter 1). However, at present the technological pathway effectively
constitutes a second-class option and sees much higher levels of dropout rates than other upper secondary schools (Fartușnic et al., 2014).

Such tracking of students into different educational paths occurs comparatively early in Romania, at the age of 14. In contrast the median age for tracking in OECD countries is 15 years, and the current trend is to try to keep to all students in comprehensive education for as long as possible. Tracking can have a negative impact on student achievement overall, since those students assigned to lower tracks tend to have poorer outcomes, and on equity, since more disadvantaged students tend to be assigned to lower tracks (OECD, 2012). The variability in student completion rates of upper secondary and baccalaureate pass rates across the different kinds of high schools suggests that these negative consequences also occur in Romania (see Policy Issue 2.2).

**Year repetition**

While there is an explicit policy which does not allow repetition in either the Preparatory Grade or Grade 1, from Grade 2 upwards students are required to achieve a final average grade of “sufficient” in their subjects. They can be required to repeat the year if they have less than “sufficient” in more than two subjects (MNESR, 2016). Students in this situation have the option of taking a second examination during the summer; if they successfully pass this, they do not have to repeat the grade (Eurydice, 2016).

In practice, repetition is relatively rare in Romanian schools by international standards, with just 4.5% of students across all levels of education repeating a grade at least once, in contrast to the OECD average of 12.4% (OECD, 2013b). Repetition is more frequent in the first years following the transition to lower secondary and upper secondary. It is higher among students in rural areas (Fartușnic et al., 2014).

**Teacher appraisal and school evaluation**

Students’ end-of-year marks and the results obtained in national examinations carry significant stakes for teachers and schools. The results of national examinations are used in the evaluation of teachers for the merit award which carries a salary increase of 25% (see Chapter 3). While student assessment is just one criterion in the evaluation process, it nonetheless carries significant weight. In the school evaluations conducted by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP), and the County School Inspectorates (CSIs), learning outcomes, as represented in assessment and examination scores, are included in the evaluation framework. The MNESR also ranks high schools nationally according to students’ entrance scores in the Grade 8 national examination. A more sophisticated ranking has been developed by ARACIP, which takes school context into account. However, ARACIP’s alternative “efficiency” school index is not systematically used in school evaluations or by schools themselves (see Chapter 4).

Romania uses assessment results to appraise the effectiveness of teachers and compare schools with others more than the OECD average (Table 2.2). While accountability information, such as the use of school exam results to publicly monitor performance, is important, the other purposes of assessment, such as improvement and development, can be lost if accountability becomes the focus of assessment policy and of public attention (Pellegrino, 2014). It may also undermine teachers’ assessments’ formative role, and encourage practices that have negative consequences for student
learning like allocating greater resources to the subjects that are tested or focusing teaching on students more likely to improve results (OECD, 2013c).

Table 2.2. Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported the assessments of students in the modal grade for 15-year-olds are used for the following purposes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Teacher-developed tests</th>
<th>Standardised tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To inform parents about their child's progress</td>
<td>OECD average: 92</td>
<td>OECD average: 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania: 97</td>
<td>Romania: 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To monitor the school's progress from year to year</td>
<td>OECD average: 56</td>
<td>OECD average: 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania: 86</td>
<td>Romania: 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make judgements about teachers' effectiveness</td>
<td>OECD average: 39</td>
<td>OECD average: 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania: 61</td>
<td>Romania: 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To compare the school with other schools</td>
<td>OECD average: 17</td>
<td>OECD average: 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania: 52</td>
<td>Romania: 75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Capacity for student assessment

Teachers' assessment knowledge and skills

Romanian teachers have limited experience of assessment beyond external assessments and examinations. Initial teacher education does include a course on assessment and evaluation, but teachers have little opportunity to develop their technical capacity in assessment and to practise formative assessment skills (see Chapter 3). They also have limited access to relevant continuing professional development. This means that most teachers learn their assessment practice from their peers in school, and from the requirements of administering external assessments and examinations. Teachers in Romania know how to follow the procedures required to use a marking scheme, aggregate scores, record marks over time, generate a portfolio of scores and report on results. They pride themselves on being able to do this work well, and they see it as an important part of their professional role. But this form of “assessment literacy” is restricted; it focuses solely on summative assessment and on the more technical work of test administration.

The roles and capacity of key institutions

Along with the MNESR, two institutions play a key role in assessments – the NCAE and the IES. Each of these institutions provides important expertise in educational assessment and evaluation, contributing to the overall professionalisation of assessment and analysis in Romania. While the IES and NCAE are both separate institutions from the MNESR, they remain accountable to the Ministry. Their programme of work is determined with the Ministry and they receive all or the majority of their operational budgets from the Ministry (although on occasion the IES has received funding from in relation to EU programmes or projects). In recent years, increases in the organisations’ workload without proportional increases in their budget and resources has reduced their ability to develop organisationally, and in some cases has created significant gaps, especially around modern test development techniques (see Policy Issue 2.4).
The National Centre for Assessment and Examinations (NCAE)

The NCAE was created in 1998 as an executive agency of the MNESR to improve the quality of assessment in Romania. It designs the national assessments and examinations, oversees their marking, and collates and analyses the results. It produces reports on national performance in examinations and assessments, although these are somewhat limited and contain little contextual data that would be useful for policy making and system planning. It also develops the two major written tests for teachers, the definitivat, for new teachers, and the titularizare, the tenure exam (see Chapter 3). Unusually for a specialist assessment centre, it is also responsible for the evaluation of textbooks. While the NCAE has historically been responsible for Romania’s participation in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), from 2018 the latter will be managed by the IES, meaning that the centre is no longer engaged in any international large-scale student assessments and the learning opportunities these provide.

Over time, the NCAE has increasingly taken on more tasks, such as the design, administration and analysis of the new national assessments, teachers’ written exams and textbook evaluation without any increase in resources. This means that it lacks the resources to modernise the national assessment system, or to provide more fine-grained analyses of student performance. The centre has a staffing allocation of 42 posts (of which 38 were filled at the time of reporting), with only 24 staff responsible for testing across 6 national examinations and assessments. It has significant technology gaps in its data management and analysis, and test development.

Institute of Educational Sciences (IES)

The IES provides research to support and evaluate policy and to support innovation in the education system. Its mission statement makes particular reference to promoting authentic, motivating, active and creative learning for students. Along with the MNESR, it produces system-level analysis.

The IES now leads Romania’s participation in PISA and previously led Romania’s participation in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) until 2011, when participation was suspended due to a lack of resources. Recently it has also been asked to analyse the results of the practice or “mock” exam provided for the Grade 8 examination. This analysis, unlike data generated by the NCAE, contained some contextual information on performance.

The IES has a key role in the development of Romania’s new curriculum, setting the framework for all school programmes and co-ordinating the development of the subject curricula. IES produces teacher guides on how to implement the new curriculum and has published a range of supporting materials online. It is also developing, in co-operation with the Ministry and NCAE a pilot to assess student acquisition of the eight key competencies, according to the expectations set out for the end of the primary cycle in the curriculum framework.

Policy issues

Romania has an assessment system which strives towards excellence. This focus on student achievement is positive and motivates many students and teachers to try to do as well as they can. Student achievement is recognised through national examinations of
increasing quality and reliability. However, achievement is narrowly focused on academic performance and does not recognise a broad range of student capabilities, or the complex competencies that are required in a modern economy. High-stakes examinations act as gatekeepers that successively select students to different educational tracks of uneven quality, while the lack of mitigating policies for students from disadvantaged backgrounds exacerbates the inequities that these examinations create. The current dominance of national testing in the assessment system also crowds out the space to develop teachers’ assessment literacy, thereby limiting one of the most important means of improving students’ learning outcomes.

Reviewing and revising some parts of the assessment system would help Romania to develop a better quality, fairer and more supportive system that encourages broader student learning. This will need to be accompanied by investment in central capacity to deliver assessments and examinations, and the accompanying guidance, and above all, in teachers’ abilities to use assessment to support student learning.

**Policy Issue 2.1: Aligning student assessment with the learning goals of the new curriculum**

Many EU and OECD countries have incorporated competence into their national curricula. However, this is not sufficient on its own to lead to changes in teaching and learning. The assessment system also needs to be aligned with the new curriculum (Pepper, 2011). This is essential not just because a valid assessment system must assess what students are expected to learn but also because it shapes teaching and learning (OECD, 2013d). When assessment practices are not aligned with the curriculum it risks undermining it, since teachers and students want to perform well in assessments, and so teach and learn to match the assessment system rather than the curriculum.

Romania has yet to align its student assessment with the competencies of its new curriculum. While the new national assessments in primary and lower secondary have started to assess core competencies, classroom-based assessment and the national examinations remain focused on traditional subject-based assessments of the knowledge and skills acquired. This creates a significant impediment to achieving the changes the new curriculum aspires to.

This policy issue explores how Romania can promote closer alignment between its practices for assessment and the learning expectations of its new curriculum. In particular it focuses on how learning standards can be strengthened as the central reference point for assessment. It also suggests how better use can also be made of Grade 2 and 6 national assessments, by providing teacher guidance, to develop teachers’ understanding of the national learning standards. It is clear that closer alignment will require efforts to develop teachers’ assessment literacy (see Policy Issue 2.3). In addition, reforms to national examinations are necessary, as the curriculum, and Grade 8 and Grade 12 examinations currently set very different expectations for learning, creating unclear goalposts for teachers and students (see Policy Issue 2.2).

**Adopting a standards-based approach**

Romania is by no means alone in finding it difficult to align its assessment system with the learning goals of a competence-based curriculum. In many OECD countries, the frameworks for national assessment are not fully aligned with the curriculum’s ambition
to develop competence. The consequence is that central and teacher-based assessments continue to typically focus on the assessment of a narrow range of skills (Nusche, 2016). Many OECD and EU countries have responded to this challenge by developing national learning standards. Learning standards set out what students are expected to know, and how they can demonstrate performance to the required level of a given competency to provide a reference for assessment. This helps to ensure that national tests, teachers’ classroom assessment and their feedback, to students are in line with national learning expectations.

A review of EU countries’ implementation of the key competencies has found that specifying learning outcomes is important to provide the context in which key competencies, and the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are required for particular levels of competence will be developed (KeyCoNet, 2014). Outside the EU, many OECD countries including Australia, Chile, Korea, Mexico and New Zealand have also developed learning standards as part of the curriculum, or as a complement to it (OECD, 2013a).

Romania’s new curriculum does include learning standards. The curriculum framework sets out what students should know and be able to do in the eight key competencies by the end of each education cycle. The grade curricula for traditional subject domains, and a specific programme for personal development are structured around the general competencies in terms of the skills, knowledge and attitudes that students are expected to develop over the year. These are broken down into the specific skills and related activities that support the development of the general competencies. Some details of how students would demonstrate achievement at each of these levels and associated activities to develop the specific skills are provided (see Box 2.2). This specification of expected student learning is positive.

Box 2.2. Romania’s learning standards for the new curriculum

In December 2015 the IES published a framework for Romania’s new curriculum, to guide the development of the new grade curricula, based on the eight key competencies that students are expected to develop during their education. The framework curriculum also aims to introduce a shift in learning to focus more on the student and their individual learning, and to develop a more integrated approach to learning across domains and competencies.

This framework sets out what students are expected to be able to do within each of the eight key competencies by the end of learning cycles. For example, by the end of Grade 4 the following is expected of students:

- **Communication in mother tongue**: identify facts and opinions, express ideas and messages, participate in verbal interactions in familiar contexts to solve school or life problems.
- **Communication in foreign languages**: identify information in simple contexts, express ideas or opinions in short messages, take part in simple verbal interactions.
- **Learning to learn**: identify the elements required by a task before starting a learning activity, formulate questions, use simple learning techniques, focus on a task until it is complete.
Box 2.2. Romania’s learning standards for the new curriculum (continued)

- **Social and civic competencies**: show interest towards self-knowledge, apply basic behaviour norms in daily contexts, take on roles and responsibilities, recognise and respect diversity (ethno-cultural, linguistic, religious, etc.).

- **Sensibility and cultural expression**: participate in cultural projects and recognise elements related to the local cultural context or to the national and/or universal cultural patrimony.

These overall learning objectives are further articulated in the curriculum for each subject and grade. For example, in Grade 4 students are expected to demonstrate the following competences associated with communication in their mother tongue:

- understand oral messages in various communication contexts
- express oral messages in various communication situations
- understand written messages in various communication contexts
- write messages in different communication contexts

The framework provides specific skills that students are expected to demonstrate to support the development of the general competence. For example, under the competence “understand oral messages in various communication contexts” students are expected to be able to:

- make simple inferences based on hearing a literary text or other accessible information
- make predictions based on text fragments heard
- offer simple conclusions from animated shorts / fragments of cartoons
- listen to some funny/interesting dialogues and identify the people involved (number and status, age, interests).


However, in Romania the learning standards embedded in the curriculum do not play the foundational role that they should in the education system. During the OECD Review Team’s interviews with teachers, there was no mention of how these standards guide their classroom planning, or how they shape their classroom assessment or feedback to students. In contrast, in countries such as New Zealand, learning standards are an integral part of the taught curriculum. In Romania, there also appeared to be little understanding among teachers of the differences between the old and the new curriculum, especially in terms of the implications of the new curriculum’s competence-based approach for teaching and assessment practice.
There are several steps that Romania can take to build teachers’ understanding of the learning expectations in the curriculum. The first is to further develop the current learning standards so that they provide greater specificity of expected learning outcomes. Second, providing marked examples of student work will help teachers to reliably assess student work according to national learning expectations. Using the current scales for classroom marking to set out levels of performance within the national learning standards would help teachers to relate the standards to their own classroom practices and establish a common language for describing performance. Finally, using the learning standards centrally in the design of other assessment and evaluation practices, in particular for the national examinations, but also the development of teacher standards and the school evaluation framework, is critical to ensure that the evaluation and assessment framework as a whole is focused on the teaching and learning that the new curriculum aims to encourage.

**Strengthening the role of existing learning standards in Romania**

While Romania’s current curriculum reform provides a strong foundation for standards-based alignment, the learning standards as currently articulated do not provide adequate guidance for assessment stakeholders, including test designers and classroom teachers, on what performance against these expected outcomes looks like and how it should be assessed. They do not clearly identify different levels of performance, which would enable teachers to assess whether a standard has been achieved and to what degree. Nor do they provide benchmarks on learning progressions towards expected outcomes, which would enable teachers to assess whether students are on the path towards acquiring specific skills. In other countries, such as New Zealand, learning standards explicitly set out the characteristics of student work at a given level of achievement alongside marked examples of student work to help teachers make consistent professional judgements about learners’ levels of achievement. New Zealand has also developed a significant amount of accompanying material to develop teachers’ understanding of, and ability to use, national learning standards (Box 2.3).

The current learning standards in Romania should be further developed, to be more specific about what students are expected to know and be able to do, and how they can demonstrate proficiency. Romania can be guided by the experience of other countries in this work, some of which have taken a selective approach and focused on core domains such as reading and writing, and mathematics. Given capacity constraints and the evidence that many Romanian students lack these essential foundations for further learning, Romania could take a similar approach. It will be critical that the NCAE and the IES cooperate closely on this work, and that they engage teachers to ensure that the strengthened learning standards provide useful guidance, while building ownership and understanding of the standards. Scotland (United Kingdom) is currently developing new “benchmarks” for learning in literacy and English, numeracy and mathematics to support the implementation of its “Curriculum for Excellence”, and is conducting an open consultation on the draft benchmarks with teachers providing them with the opportunity to comment on them before they become final policy tools (Education Scotland, 2017).
Box 2.3. New Zealand’s National Standards

New Zealand implemented national standards in 2010. The standards set clear expectations that students need to meet in reading, writing and mathematics during their first eight years at school. The national standards present expectations of what students should be able to do “after one year at school”, “after two years at school”, etc. Each standard sets out the overall standard, for example, according to the writing standard after two years at school students will “create texts in order to meet the writing demands of the New Zealand Curriculum at level 1. Students will use their writing to think about, record, and communicate experiences, ideas, and information to meet specific learning purposes across the curriculum.”

Key characteristics further describe student writing at this level, and what their texts will include. For example, after two years at school student writing will typically include:

- experiences, information and/or ideas that relate to a curriculum topic, supported by some (mostly relevant) detail and/or personal comment.
- mainly simple and compound sentences that have some variation in their beginnings simple conjunctions used correctly, etc.

The standard is illustrated by different examples of student work, each with a commentary indicating why this student work is at the given standard (see figure).
Box 2.3. New Zealand’s National Standards (continued)

**Learning progressions** for reading, writing and mathematics alert teachers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children need to draw on in order to meet the national standards.

Teachers are also supported by a range of online assessment tools, available at a dedicated assessment website, Assessment Online ([http://assessment.tki.org.nz/](http://assessment.tki.org.nz/)). The tools available include an assessment tool selector, assessment resource maps and an assessment resource bank to help teachers select the most appropriate tool from a range of formal and informal assessment methods to use in making overall judgements of students’ progress and achievement.

As well as accompanying documentation on how to use and understand the national standards, teachers are supported by online **professional development** modules, that illustrate the national standards and help schools and teachers to understand the standards and how they relate to the curriculum have been developed to support teachers.

Concerns about the overall dependability and consistency of teacher judgements led to the development of the Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT) in 2012. The PaCT ([http://pactinfo.education.govt.nz/](http://pactinfo.education.govt.nz/)) is an online resource to help teachers make their professional judgements using the national standards. It includes frameworks, developed with curriculum experts, that break down mathematics, reading and writing into different aspects to prompt teachers to notice what students know and can do across the breadth of these areas. Each aspect in the frameworks includes a number of learning stages that are illustrated by students’ work on a range of tasks and problems.


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Romania might develop a separate policy document on the learning standards to accompany the new grade curricula that have been released. It is important to ensure that the new standards and associated guidance are accessible so that teachers are able to consult them when they want, and use them as practical tools in their classrooms; Ireland’s Curriculum Online website might serve as an example in this regard (Box 2.4). Important things to include on Romania’s platform include:

- **Learning standards and performance descriptors**: clear statements of expected student learning and the key characteristics of student work by grade in the core domains of reading and writing, and mathematics. This should also include performance descriptors that set out the characteristics of student work at different levels of performance (see below).

- **Examples of students work**: accompanying the standards and levels of performance with examples of student work would help to develop teachers’ understanding of the standards and their ability to apply them practically. The examples should be accompanied with commentary or marking from teachers to build teachers’ understanding of what is required to reach a given level of achievement. The examples can be built up over time and include examples of both classroom-based assessment and external assessments and examinations.
• **Learning progressions.** Romania might also develop learning progressions as a supporting document for the learning standards. The learning progressions would set out how students typically move through learning in reading and writing, and mathematics in line with the expectations set out in the learning standards. These could be accompanied by examples of student work at the different learning stages. Learning progressions signal to teachers the knowledge and skills that students need to develop and be able to draw on so that they are able to meet the expectations of the curriculum and learning standards.

**Box 2.4. Supporting alignment between the curriculum and assessment in Ireland**

The recent curriculum reforms in Ireland have placed a strong emphasis on alignment of the curriculum and assessment. By accessing the curriculum online, teachers can click on some of the learning outcomes in the curriculum, to access examples of assessment tasks relevant to that outcome. These tasks have been undertaken by students, and marked by teachers using a 3 point scale – at expectations, ahead of expectations, or yet to meet expectations. In the guidelines on the end of junior cycle assessment (including a state examination) the same learning outcomes are referenced, and similar examples of student work with teacher commentary are used to help teachers and students to prepare for the test. The same learning outcomes inform test design.


**Relating learning standards to the current scales used for classroom assessment**

One way to develop clarity and understanding around national learning standards would be to use the current scales for classroom marking to set out levels of performance within the national learning standards, to enable teachers to see the direct connection between how they currently assess their students and national learning expectations. In primary education, this would mean setting out how different levels of performance within the national standards correspond to the four point scale of very good, good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory. For example, a ‘satisfactory’ or ‘good’ mark might mean that a student had met the national learning expectations for that specific grade and subject, whereas ‘very good’ might indicate that they were currently exceeding national learning expectations. In secondary education, the same could be done using the 10 point numeric scale for classroom assessment to set out levels of performance within the learning standards. Providing an explanation of what the numerical mark signifies on the descriptor scale in terms of student performance would provide teachers and students with a better understanding of national expectations of student learning and progress, rather than a numerical mark which provides limited information to inform future student learning (Table 2.3).
Table 2.3. Illustrative example: Communication in the mother tongue, Grade 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning standard</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Numerical mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides a high-level description of standard that sets out what students can do at this level.</td>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>8 -10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sets out typical characteristics of work at this level.</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>6 - 7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>4 - 5.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>0 - 3.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptors using four-point scale for primary classroom assessment describe different levels of performance within the learning standard. Each descriptor sets out the characteristics of student work at the level of performance and might link to examples of student work.

Illustration of performance descriptors using numeric scale for secondary education classroom assessment. Each marking band sets out the characteristics of student work that would receive this mark, and might link to examples of student work.

Such an approach would help to develop a common language and approach for assessing performance in relation to national standards. It would also help to ground the new curriculum and standards in teachers’ existing classroom practice. Teachers would understand how the marks that they give their students in classrooms correspond to national learning expectations. Developing teachers’ understanding of national learning expectations and their ability to relate this to their classroom practice is essential to create the foundations for using the national diagnostic assessments more effectively and to build teachers’ assessment literacy (see Policy Issue 2.3). It would also provide an objective basis for the awarding of classroom marks to encourage consistency and reliability, which does not currently exist.

Positioning standards as the key reference point for assessment and examinations

Further developing the standards will help to ensure that they are practical tools that shape assessment practice in classrooms and the development of external assessments and examinations. This will support coherence across external assessments and examinations and teachers’ classroom assessment, and with the curriculum’s expectations (Figure 2.3).

While Romania’s new national assessments seek to evaluate student competencies, the national examinations continue to assess theoretical knowledge in distinct domains. To some extent, this reflects the fact that Romania is only now starting to roll out the new curriculum in lower secondary education, which is where preparation for the first major examination in Grade 8 begins. Given the stakes of the examination, and the influence it has on teaching and learning, it will be very important that the Grade 8 examination is revised to assess the learning outcomes that the curriculum is working towards. This should be done gradually, to ensure that students are prepared for the change, for example by progressively introducing more competency-based items (see Policy Issue 2.2). Strengthening teachers’ understanding of national learning expectations as outlined above, and providing a national item bank of assessment items, will help to ensure that teachers are able to use more competency-based assessments in their classrooms to prepare students for this change to the national examination.
While the curriculum reform has not yet reached upper secondary education, there is also scope to adapt the Grade 12 baccalaureate, even on the basis of the current curriculum, so that it includes more questions that encourage students to apply what they have learned in different contexts and demonstrate higher order abilities like critical thinking and problem solving. This will be important not just to orient the system towards the same expectations, but also to ensure that students are well prepared for a knowledge economy. At present, international assessments show that the majority of Romanian students struggle with more complex tasks (see Chapter 1).

The learning standards should also provide the foundations for ensuring coherence across the whole evaluation and assessment framework (see Figure 2.3). They would guide the development of professional standards for teachers, which set out what a teacher should know and be able to do (see Chapter 3). Equally, the national learning standards should also inform the development of the definition of a good school and the criteria that is used to evaluate schools, as well as what a principal should know and be able to do, in principal standards (see Chapter 4). This will provide the guidance and coherence to help ensure that schools provide a teaching and learning environment where students are supported to meet national learning expectations. Ensuring that the learning standards inform teacher and school standards in this way would also be a powerful lever to increase their visibility and support coherence across the evaluation and assessment framework. Adopting national goals linked to learning standards in the new national strategy for education would further emphasise their role nationally (see Chapter 5).

**Figure 2.3. Using learning standards to align the assessment system in Romania**

![Diagram](image)

**Using national assessments to communicate learning standards**

The new assessments introduced in Grades 2 and 6 have been designed with explicit reference to the new curriculum and focus on assessing the key competencies that students are expected to acquire by the end of the grades. These diagnostic assessments can help to develop a better understanding among teachers and learners as to what national learning standards signify in terms of acquired knowledge and skills, complementing other resources like examples of student work and learning progressions. Providing teachers with guidance on how to interpret, grade and report student’s
performance in the domains assessed would help to achieve this. Such support would not only help in communicating learning standards but also in developing teachers’ assessment skills and ensuring that the results of the diagnostic assessments are used, as they were intended, to encourage more individualised instruction and learning (see Policy Issue 2.3).

Classroom teachers are responsible for marking the national assessments, which is helpful for developing teachers’ understanding of national standards. However, the central marking guidelines that are provided for teachers simply indicate the responses that should be marked as correct, or partially correct. Improved guidance for teachers when marking students’ work in the national assessments, linked to the curriculum’s learning standards, could help to develop teachers’ understanding of what is expected of students and how to assess their performance. For open-ended questions, this might include marking guidance on how to interpret student work that is below, meets or exceeds national expectations for student learning linked to the four point descriptor scale (see above) accompanied by examples of student work at these different levels.

Currently, the national assessments do not result in a numerical or descriptor mark, rather students receive a two page report indicating which responses were correct, partially correct, and incorrect, and their overall strengths and weaknesses. The rationale for adopting this approach is positive, to avoid that stakes are associated with the assessments and to encourage their diagnostic use. However, reporting in this way provides little indication as to a student’s level of learning according to national expectations and is a missed opportunity to develop teachers’ knowledge of learning standards.

Reporting the national assessment results according to the learning standards, and adopting the four point descriptor scale used for classroom assessment would help the assessments to provide meaningful information about a student’s learning in line with national expectations. For example, a student’s results from the Grade 2 national examination in communication in the mother tongue might indicate if a student is meeting the learning expectations for the overall competence (e.g. indicated by a ‘satisfactory’ result), and also for each of the specific competencies covered by the assessment. A commentary on why the mark was awarded would also be useful. After the new curriculum has been implemented in lower and upper secondary, and the national examinations revised in line with this to assess competence, the reporting of the examination results should also be adapted to include reporting according to the learning standards.

**Clarifying responsibilities for learning standards**

Further developing Romania's learning standards will require significant collaboration right across the education system. The IES, as the developer of the curriculum framework and co-ordinator of the grade curricula, will play a key role. Equally important is the role of the NCAE, which will design and administer the national assessments and examinations based on the learning standards. Successful collaboration between these two organisations, and with the MNESR, will be critical to strengthening the existing standards.

Other countries have successfully developed standards with a similar organisational arrangement across two separate organisations. In Ireland, curriculum and standards are set through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, but the examinations are designed and delivered by the State Examinations Commission. The Netherlands’
Institute for Curriculum Development is responsible for the curriculum, but a different agency, the Central Institute for Test Development, organises testing. In such contexts, success depends on close working relationships and clear oversight and policy direction from the respective ministries.

In Romania, it will be important to clarify the roles of the IES and the NCAE, and their respective relationships to the ministry, in order to support a close working relationship and develop a shared understanding of what student performance against national standards means. Key functions like analysing exam results and administering international assessments have been moved between the two bodies. To help ensure that learning standards are strengthened, one organisation should explicitly be given the responsibility to do this work. Otherwise there is a risk that the standards will remain as they currently are – something recognised as important but which no organisation is responsible for. Ensuring sufficient and consistent resourcing levels is also important so that both organisations are able to perform this work (see Policy Issue 2.4).

Policy Issue 2.2: Mitigating the negative impact of the national examinations on student learning and progression

Romania’s two national examinations carry high stakes for students, teachers and schools. In common with other high-stakes examinations they have consequences for students by determining selection into subsequent education levels, and also affect teacher accountability and the reputation of schools. The publication of student results in a national high school ranking based on the Grade 8 national examination results and their use in teacher appraisal add to the exams’ high stakes.

High-stakes examinations are common to many educational systems, as are their limitations. In Romania, the influential role of the exams in determining a student’s future creates particularly negative consequences for the breadth and depth of student learning, motivation and equity of achievement. Reforming the examinations, particularly the Grade 8 examination, will be essential if Romania is to achieve the positive changes in teaching and learning set out in the new curriculum, and create a more equitable system where students from all backgrounds can succeed.

Reforming Romania’s examinations as the sine-qua-non for improving assessment and learning

Romania’s two national examinations carry high stakes for individual students, playing a significant role in determining their future life choices. While high-stakes examinations are common in many countries to determine students’ future educational pathways, they are associated with many limitations. This means they need to be well designed and administered, and appropriate use is made of their results to mitigate their negative impacts. Conscious of the negative impact of high-stakes exams on student learning and motivation, some countries have developed dedicated policies to reduce their consequences. Although Romania has improved the reliability of its national examinations, it has no clear policy to reduce their high stakes and the associated challenges.
Impact on student learning and motivation

High-stakes examinations can have a significant impact on student learning and motivation. As an examination approaches, students focus on learning for the test (Smyth, 2016). Preparation for tests can dominate learning as students begin to actively resist classroom practice they see as irrelevant to test preparation, narrowing learning. In Romania, it was reported to the OECD Review Team during interviews how the high-stakes examinations shape student learning. The Grade 8 exam only tests Romanian language and mathematics (and language and literature in the minority language for students also following this curriculum); and teachers told the Review Team in interviews that this means basic knowledge is not being developed in the subjects that are not tested, such as science, geography or history. In addition, an unusual feature of the Grade 12 baccalaureate is that in some subjects it tests content from earlier grades. For example, in physics it tests content from Grades 9 and 10. This means students have little motivation for learning in such subjects in the final two grades of upper secondary education.

The impact of the examinations on student learning and motivation are not confined to students in Grades 8 and 12. The “backwash” – the effect of examinations on what happens in the classroom – from these examinations, particularly the Grade 8 examination, reaches back into earlier grades. Indeed, the assessment system is designed to channel backwash, because the final Grade 8 results includes marks from school assessments in Grades 5-8. While this may reduce the stakes of the individual examination in Grade 8, it does mean that there are high stakes attached to students’ classroom work which may reduce the likelihood that students are prepared to reveal gaps in their knowledge or that they feel it is safe to make mistakes, which are integral to effective learning.

High-stakes examinations can also encourage disengagement among students less likely to perform well in them. Students perceive that the test’s difficulty means they will never perform well so they become demotivated and may eventually drop out. This situation occurs more frequently among low income, minority and low-performing students (OECD, 2013d).

There is strong evidence that Romania’s high-stakes examinations may be creating such disengagement, particularly the baccalaureate. One-fifth of Romania’s student population drops out of school by the age of 16. While it is clearly not the sole factor, dropout rates in Grades 11 and 12 prior to the baccalaureate are higher among groups of students who perform less well in the examination – that is, students in technological high schools and those attending school in rural areas where the pass rate is significantly below the national average (Fartușnic et al., 2014). In addition, an increasing share of eligible students are choosing not to take the baccalaureate exam. In 2009 nearly all eligible students chose to sit the exam, but by 2013 this had fallen by 20%. While this may reflect an improving vocational offer (see Chapter 1), the fall also coincides with the introduction of cameras and may reflect the perceived increased difficulty of the exam (MNESR, 2015).

Equity and fairness

Romania’s high-stakes examinations create concerns around fairness and equity. In all OECD countries, socio-economic background is a significant determinant of educational achievement (OECD, 2013b). It is particularly acute in Romania, where there are significant inequalities in educational opportunity and performance, especially between students from urban and rural backgrounds at all stages of the education system.
The high-stakes examinations amplify these inequities, by making important decisions about a student’s future based on their performance in examinations which is strongly influenced by factors beyond their control. This raises serious concerns about the fairness and validity of the national examinations as the means to evaluate students’ aptitude for future learning.

Because Romania does not collect student background data, it is hard to analyse its impact on student performance, but the available evidence shows that student achievement in examinations is heavily influenced by socio-economic factors. There is a significant difference between the performance of rural and urban students. In 2014, the success rate in the baccalaureate was 17% higher among students living in urban areas than in rural areas (MNESR, 2014b). The IES’s analysis of the Grade 8 mock exam results in 2016 similarly found that the average grade in rural areas was 1.38 points lower than in urban areas. Equally, in regions with lower levels of economic development, student performance was lower (IES, 2016). While the report acknowledges its limitations, given the significant number of absentees who do not take the test and the absence of the stakes associated with the “real” test, it nevertheless provides important contextual analysis of performance.

Results from PISA also indicate that Romania’s education system is not as effective as others at recognising and nurturing the talent of students from lower income groups. In Romania, just 11% of students overcame a low socio-economic background to perform among the top share of students nationally in science in PISA 2015. By contrast, in Poland and Slovenia 35% of low income students were top performers in science, above the average for OECD countries of 29% (OECD, 2016a).

Private tutoring

The considerable stakes for individual students associated with Romania’s examinations means that many parents employ private tutors for their children. While the costs and scale of private tutoring are not well recorded, it is reported that some families are paying up to EUR 1 250 annually for tutoring in the secondary cycle (Save the Children, 2010). One study estimated that the overall cost to Romanian households was EUR 300 million annually (European Commission, 2011). It was indicated to the OECD Review Team during interviews that the vast majority of Grade 8 and Grade 12 students have private tutors. The practice is particularly widespread among students in the more prestigious theoretical and vocational high schools. Private tutoring exists in many countries but the scale of its use in Romania is problematic since it increases the inequalities of the system, providing more advantaged students with an additional advantage that students from lower income groups may not be able to access.

Consequences for students’ educational pathways

It is normal for high-stakes examinations, like Romania’s baccalaureate, to be an important factor in students’ future education choices. It is less usual for a high-stakes examination to be taken as young as 14 years old, before the end of compulsory education, especially one with such a fundamental influence on a student’s educational choices as Romania’s Grade 8 exam. Early tracking exacerbates differences in learning between students; it increases inequity since tracking is more likely to place students from disadvantaged groups in lower or vocational tracks and the earlier the tracking occurs, the less easy is it for students to switch between tracks later (OECD, 2012). In Romania, the
variability in different high schools’ completion rates and student learning outcomes means that the high school that students attend is highly influential in determining their future life chances.

Systems that “track students” in this way usually use a range of measures to mitigate the consequences for particular groups of students, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged families and communities. Such measures might include ensuring permeability between the different tracks or targeted support to help well-performing students from less advantaged backgrounds access university. For example, students in the Netherlands take a test at the age of 12, but the results are just one element of the evidence used to decide the kind of programme they follow and students are actively involved in the choice of school (OECD, 2012; Box 2.5).

**Box 2.5. Mitigating the negative effects of early tracking in the Netherlands**

In the Netherlands students are tracked into one of eight different programmes when transitioning from primary to secondary education at 12 years. These eight programmes cover four broad orientations: practical training (four years in duration), pre-vocational programmes (four years in duration), senior general education (five years in duration to prepare students for applied subjects at the university level) and pre-university education (six years in duration, to prepare students for tertiary education) (OECD, 2016b). Students are tracked by ability on the basis of teacher advice and their results in an end of primary test.

Some cross-country studies have found that early tracking increases inequity with no clear effect on average achievement (OECD 2016b), however the Netherlands has been able to achieve relatively high levels of performance while ensuring equity in education. While there is a high degree of variation in student performance between schools, this variation is not associated with greater socio-economic segregation of students across schools than the average in OECD countries. The variation in student performance that is attributable to students’ socio-economic background is only 12.5%, slightly below the average across OECD countries of 12.9%.

The Netherlands has put in place policies and practices that mitigate the negative effects of early tracking for equity:

**A strong vocational system**

A considerable proportion of students are selected into the vocational track, nearly half in 2015. Quality vocational education is supported by comparatively high spending, with annual per student spending more than twice the OECD average. The vocational system also has strong links to the labour market. Overall the strong vocational system helps to ensure that its students receive education on par with other programmes and have opportunities to achieve their full potential.

**Track mobility and flexibility**

Through track mobility and flexibility, the Dutch school system is able to reduce the negative consequences of placing students into programmes that do not correspond to their current or potential performance, with students able to transfer between programmes. When needed, secondary schools have the freedom to delay selection in the first year of secondary schools through “bridge classes”, giving schools an additional year to better assess a student’s potential for the various education tracks.

Further, graduates from all tracks can pursue tertiary education through the framework of “scaffolding” diplomas. These diplomas allow students to proceed to the next education level automatically upon graduation from their track level (OECD, 2016b).
Box 2.5. Mitigating the negative effects of early tracking in the Netherlands (continued)

Equitable allocation of funds and additional mechanisms to target funding

Public funds are allocated equitably across public and private schools. The Netherlands is one of the few countries participating in PISA where principals in socio-economically disadvantaged schools are not more concerned than principals in advantaged schools about the resources in their schools.

Additional funding mechanisms provide schools with block grants based on their student population. At the primary level, schools receive government grants based on the educational background of students’ parents and at the secondary level schools receive extra funds for disadvantaged students based on the school’s location. Schools may also receive targeted funding for special purposes e.g. dropout prevention.

Other characteristics of the Dutch education system that help to mitigate the negative effects of tracking on equity include almost universal pre-primary education, strong accountability and school autonomy in compulsory education, and comparatively high spending on secondary education compared with other OECD countries.


Romania does not have any policies to mitigate the consequences of tracking for certain groups of students. This is particularly problematic given that students’ socio-economic status, or whether they live in a rural or urban area, is a strong determinant of their Grade 8 examination result, further adding to the inequality in Romania’s school system. For all of these reasons, reforming Romania’s two high-stakes examinations, and particularly the Grade 8 test, is of national importance.

Improving the quality and fairness of the Grade 8 examination

First, and most immediately, Romania should make sure that the Grade 8 examination is fair and reliable. Secondly, over the medium term, Romania should review the use of the examination for tracking students into different educational pathways.

Broadening the domains and competencies assessed

Currently, the domains assessed in Grade 8 are limited to Romanian language and literature and mathematics. Clearly not all the eight key competencies in the curriculum can be effectively assessed by a national examination but extending the range of subjects would help to encourage broader learning across the curriculum.

The tasks that students are required to complete should also be addressed. Operationally, the national scale of centralised examinations means that they also need to be cost-effective, and administered and scored over a short period of time. In many other OECD and EU countries these constraints mean that open-ended writing tasks, closed-format short answers and multiple-choice questions are often favoured over more creative assessment items, such as a problem to solve or a scenario to discuss and analyse (OECD, 2013d). Romania’s two high-stakes examinations also use multiple choice items, closed-format short answers and open-ended writing tasks. Such tasks can assess complex
competencies, but their design and quality are crucial. Multiple choice tests must be of a high quality if they are to assess higher-order skills and constructed responses items such as essay writing require careful guidance for human assessors to rate performance levels reliably and accurately (OECD/UNESCO, 2016). The OECD Review Team’s interviews with teachers suggested that these important quality controls may not be in place in Romania, with teachers reporting that students memorise content to prepare for the Grade 8 exam, for which they have no use afterwards.

In the future, once the new curriculum has been implemented across all grades, Romania may also consider introducing competency-based assessments that combine assessment of a student’s knowledge of a topic with their ability to apply that knowledge to solve the problems or situations presented to them (OECD/UNESCO, 2016). Such assessments should be introduced progressively so that students have the opportunity to become familiar with this type of assessment. Romania might learn from the examples of other countries such as Poland, which has recently reformed its selection examinations towards a competency-based test. Since tutoring for competency-based tests is more difficult, this may also help to curb private tutoring, with positive consequences for equity. Given the challenges associated with the baccalaureate examination in Romania, similar reforms should be considered for this examination too.

**Reviewing the composition of the final grade**

Romania needs to critically consider the benefits of including student marks from all of lower secondary (Grades 5 to 8), and marks for behaviour and attendance in the final examination result for Grade 8. In theory, including such classroom-based assessment marks should broaden the range of knowledge and competence included in the final mark. Yet in practice, since these marks tend to be generated through summative pen-and-paper tests, using them risks just including more of the same type of assessment that the final examination mark provides.

As a first step, the practice of including marks for behaviour should be ended. There is no evidence that this approach is successful in improving student behaviour. It has been phased out in other countries (OECD, 2012). The number of years that are assessed should also be reduced so that the final Grade 8 mark is a more accurate reflection of students’ current development and to reduce the examination’s impact on learning in the early years of lower secondary. The marks assessed for the final mark might be reduced to just those from Grades 7 and 8.

Priority should be given to improving the consistency and reliability of the marks for classroom-based assessments. One way to do this is for classroom work to be marked by teachers who would then meet with colleagues from the same school to “moderate” the marks using the curriculum’s standards and examples of student work. The focus of the meetings would be the standard of achievement demonstrated by the work, rather than to check on whether procedure was followed. A sample of items might be externally checked to ensure consistency in classroom marking nationally. Such a process has the added benefit of increasing the visibility and impact of standards across the system. Ireland has recently adopted such an approach, as part of scaling back its end of lower secondary external examination. It introduced school marks for learning that is difficult to assess in traditional examinations, alongside a scaled-back external examination (Box 2.6).
Box 2.6. Ireland’s reforms to the Junior Cycle

Ireland has recently reformed its first three years of lower secondary – the Junior Cycle – to provide students with quality learning opportunities that balance learning knowledge and develop a wide range of skills and thinking abilities. The most significant change in the new Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment, which is now based on:

- ongoing formative assessments, including routine teacher-designed tasks and tests
- structured classroom-based assessments conducted in second and third years
- assessment of learning arising from short courses or priority learning units
- the written assessment task following the second classroom-based assessment
- the results of the summative state examination.

The reform aims to reduce the focus on one externally assessed examination as a means of assessing students (the traditional examination at the end of lower secondary), and increase the prominence of classroom-based assessment and formative assessment. This emphasis on classroom assessment is based on research which shows that the greatest benefits for students’ learning occur when teachers provide effective feedback to students that helps them to understand how their learning can be improved. Classroom assessments should use a variety of assessment approaches that allow students to demonstrate their understanding of concepts and skills and their ability to apply them in ways that would not be possible in a written exam. The interlinked and complementary nature of student learning, ongoing assessment, classroom-based assessment, the assessment task and the state-certified examination is set out below:

Ongoing formative assessment

Teachers will use the national learning outcomes that clearly set out what the students should know, understand and be able to do as a starting point for planning a unit of learning and to develop learning intentions and success criteria to be shared and discussed with their students. They will use their learning intentions and success criteria as the basis for providing feedback to help students plan their next steps in learning. Students will also be encouraged to reflect on how they are progressing in their own learning and provide feedback to their teachers.

Classroom-based assessments

For each subject, two structured classroom-based assessments facilitated by a student’s classroom teacher, will be introduced to contribute to and build on formative assessment in the classroom. One takes place in the second year and the other during the third year. Each assessment is based on a variety of assessment types, which might include project tasks, oral language tasks, investigations, practical or designing and making tasks, field studies and artistic performance.
Box 2.6. Ireland’s reforms to the Junior Cycle (continued)

The comparability and consistency of the classroom-based assessments will be ensured by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) specifying the assessment tasks and designing some of them. Schools will have the flexibility to select those tasks that best meet their programme and students’ learning needs. The NCCA will also develop standards or reference points for the classroom-based assessments that describe performance at a number of levels, accompanied by exemplars of students’ work at the different levels. The provision of standards and exemplars of work will provide teachers with a clear framework within which to evaluate the work of their own students for assessment purposes.

Assessment task

The second classroom-based assessment for each subject will be followed by a formal written assessment task based on the topic or task undertaken in the second classroom-based assessment. This assessment task will be marked centrally along with the state-certified, final examination at the end of lower secondary in the subject.

Reporting

At the end of lower secondary students will receive the composite Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) from his/her school. The JCPA draws upon and reports on achievement across all elements of assessment including ongoing, formative assessment; classroom-based assessments and results from the state-certified examinations and the assessment tasks.

Professional support and collaboration

Professional development and collaboration between teachers is central to informing their understanding of teaching, learning and assessment and their practice in the classroom. Under the new reforms, teachers involved in teaching and assessing the classroom-based components will engage in Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings in the school where they will share and discuss samples of their assessments of students’ work. This will help to build a common understanding about the quality of students’ learning to help ensure consistency and fairness within and across schools in the appraisal of student learning. A support service for teachers will also help them to use the NCCA standards collaboratively with other teachers in the school.


Once the reliability of classroom marking is improved, it might account for an increased proportion of the Grade 8 final mark with less emphasis on the external examination. The work assessed might include projects or investigations in school. Investigations of this kind could involve an interdisciplinary approach, and could focus on competence rather than on disciplinary knowledge. Similar options for more project-based school work and controlled assessment might be considered for the Grade 12 examinations.

These options would need to be accompanied by the strengthening and use of learning standards across the system (see Policy Issue 2.1), and a programme of capacity building for teachers to support their understanding of, and skills for, assessment (see Policy Issue 2.3).
**Improving the analysis of results**

More sophisticated analysis of items used in the examination would provide the data to increasingly improve its quality. Modern item analysis such as item response theory (IRT) would provide greater understanding of the quality and efficiency of items used in examinations. Currently the NCAE has no capacity to do this type of analysis. Making the resources available to recruit psychometricians with these analytical skills would provide the insights needed to help select better quality items over time, and develop a national item bank, to improve test design (see Policy Issue 2.4).

**Reviewing learning pathways in secondary education**

Romania’s future social and economic development depends on improving the learning outcomes of all its students. This means creating an education system where students from all backgrounds can access high-quality education that recognises a broad set of learning needs and capabilities. Improving the design and quality of the Grade 8 examination will help, but its position and role within the secondary education system should also be reviewed. The Grade 8 and baccalaureate examinations are effectively gatekeeper examinations that serve to identify an elite with the academic skills for higher education while reducing the educational opportunities for other students. The examination system in many other EU and OECD countries shares this historical function. However, as countries seek to adapt their education systems to the broad-based needs of their modern economies they are trying to improve the learning pathways and approaches to certification in secondary school so that students remain in education for longer and gain recognition for a wider range of skills. Romania is yet to develop such a strong, coherent reform agenda for addressing the negative effects of a highly selective and unequal secondary school system.

**Policy approaches to learning and assessment in secondary education are fragmented**

Concerns about high dropout rates and poor learning outcomes in many of Romania’s technological high schools, and poor transition rates to tertiary education have led to increasing policy focus on the quality of upper secondary schooling. This has led to new initiatives including the World Bank-funded Romania Secondary Education Project (ROSE Project), which aims to improve retention in upper secondary and transition to tertiary education. The ROSE project also has a mandate to consider the introduction of a national assessment at the end of compulsory education in Grade 10. Important efforts are also underway as part of the National Strategy for Vocational Education to upgrade Romania’s vocational schools and enhance their attractiveness to students and relevance for the labour market. This includes measures to improve the assessment and certification of technical skills so that students’ qualifications are more closely aligned with the European Qualifications Framework and are recognised by employers.

These initiatives focus on important challenges facing Romanian secondary education and the proposed policies on assessment address identified gaps in learning recognition. However, they do not appear to be connected to each other or to form part of a systematic policy for secondary education reform. They are led by different units funded by different external sources, raising cross-government co-ordination challenges, although since 2016 a Secretary of State has been made responsible for cross-ministry co-ordination in this area. The initiatives raise several unanswered questions, such as the implications for the
Grade 8 examination of introducing an assessment in Grade 10, and how the Grade 12 baccalaureate would need to evolve to recognise technical and applied domains. It is also unclear how technical qualifications might align with university entry requirements.

**Romania needs to develop a coherent policy agenda for secondary education**

If these measures are to lead to real improvements in participation and learning outcomes they need to be part of a coherent reform agenda for the full secondary education cycle. It will be important to address centrally some of the current aspects of secondary schooling that pose particular barriers to progression, such as tracking from 14 years, rigidity across different tracks in upper secondary, great variety in quality across different schools, and the lack of mechanisms to enable disadvantaged students to progress and access high-quality schooling and university.

While Grade 9, and the end of lower secondary exam, has been moved between lower and upper secondary in recent years, the idea of postponing selection to Grade 9 or 10 does not appear to be under discussion as part of the current initiatives to improve secondary education. This is something that Romania might want to reopen. As discussed above, countries are increasingly moving to delay selection to create more comprehensive systems, giving students equal learning opportunities for longer, at least until the end of compulsory education, and keeping pathways between programmes and schools open. In 1999 Poland implemented structural reforms to develop a more comprehensive model of lower secondary education with equal access to education opportunities that included deferring selection by one year. This has resulted in documentable gains in student achievement, in particular, among disadvantaged student groups (OECD, 2013c; Box 2.7).

**Box 2.7. Poland’s reforms for a comprehensive lower secondary gymnasium**

In the early 1990s Poland had one of the lowest participation rates in full secondary education and in higher education in the OECD. In 1999 it implemented structural reforms to increase the number of people with secondary and higher education qualifications by ensuring equal educational opportunities, and supporting improvements in the quality of education.

The reforms created a new type of school – the lower secondary gymnasium, a comprehensive school for all students. This created a new education structure of 6+3+3 – six years of primary school followed by three years in a comprehensive lower secondary gymnasium. This replaced a previous system where students remained in primary school for eight years and were then tracked into different streams based on their performance in the placement exams (the *kuratoria*). The top 20% went into the three-year general secondary lyceum, where they took academic courses to prepare for the university entry examination (the *matura*). The bottom half went into two-year basic vocational schools run by individual sector industries and the remaining students went into two-year technical secondary schools to prepare as technicians. Under the new system all students follow the same common curriculum until the age of 15, extending comprehensive education by one year.

This structural reform was accompanied by a new core curriculum for the lower secondary gymnasium which set the expectation that all students should be taught to equal standards set out in national curricula standards. Curriculum development was decentralised to the local level to engage teachers and schools, and an accountability system of central examinations was used to monitor results.
Boxes suggest that this structural reform has helped to reduce performance differences between schools, and to improve the performance of the lowest-achieving students. In PISA 2000, Poland’s average score was well below the OECD average and 21% of students only reached the lowest of PISA’s competency levels, Level 1. Students attending the basic vocational schools performed significantly below their peers in the general education system, with nearly 70% performing at the lowest literacy level. By 2003, Poland’s average student performance had improved, and notably, Poland saw the greatest decrease in performance difference between schools of all OECD countries. The trend continued in 2006 PISA where studies found a 115 point improvement among those students who would previously have attended the basic vocational schools but now received an additional year of general education in the new comprehensive lower secondary gymnasium.

**Policy issue 2.3: Supporting teachers’ assessment literacy**

Romania has modernised its education system significantly in recent decades. However, the legacy of the previous regime, characterised by centralisation, control and a focus on information and memorisation, still frame many aspects of schooling. In particular, classroom assessment is often limited to pen-and-paper summative tests, with limited use of formative assessment. If teaching and learning in Romania is to change, it will be imperative to develop teachers’ assessment literacy. Of all educational policy interventions, formative assessment is found to have some of the most significant positive impacts on student achievement (Black and William, 1998). At the same time, central tests are limited in the range and complexity of the competencies that they are able to assess, leaving a gap that teacher-based assessment needs to address. Developing an assessment system that encourages teaching and learning across the full range of Romania’s new curriculum will require improving teachers’ knowledge and skills in assessment.

**Encouraging formative assessment**

Formative assessment in classrooms refers to frequent, interactive assessments of students’ progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately (OECD, 2005a). It occurs during the learning process itself to provide information that is used to shape and deepen subsequent learning (OECD, 2013d). An important principle in defining formative assessment is its purpose, which is to support student learning. For this reason, the phrase “assessment for learning” has emerged as a way to articulate the particular role of formative assessment. At the heart of assessment for learning practices is high-quality feedback from teachers on student learning. This feedback, often without numeric scores or ranking, can guide students in the next steps of their learning, and motivate them to achieve (Box 2.8).
Box 2.8. A framework for formative assessment

In a review of formative assessment practice in classrooms, the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) identified six elements that featured in classrooms with strong practice. They are presented in the white circles below. In 2016, reviewing a decade of intense activity across school systems in introducing formative assessment policies and practices, Harlen (2016) identified the key features of a formative assessment framework. Some overlap with the earlier OECD/CERI analysis, but she notes some additional emphases, particularly on student involvement. These are presented in the dark blue circles.


The achievement gains that result from formative classroom assessment practices have been found to be among the most significant of any educational intervention, especially among low-achieving students (Black and William, 1998). Assessment for learning is also used to improve student engagement, which is important for all students but especially for those at risk of dropping out. Given the strong, positive impact that formative assessment is found to have on student learning, most school systems are adopting these policies, particularly in secondary education when student engagement and motivation are a concern (Box 2.9).
Box 2.9. OECD countries’ policies to support the use of formative assessment in classrooms

Many OECD countries are moving towards putting in place policy frameworks that support and promote formative assessment, in recognition of the positive impact that it can have on student learning. Romania can draw on some of the experiences and strategies of these countries as it develops its own strategy to encourage greater use of formative assessment in its classrooms:

Ireland: Guidelines and tools to promote the use of formative assessment in classrooms

In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has contributed to the development of expertise in formative assessment through its curriculum development projects with schools. As part of its work with groups of teachers in its Primary School Network, the NCCA explores how formative assessment approaches can be implemented in Irish classrooms. The NCCA has also designed materials to support teachers and schools in expanding their assessment toolkit. Its Assessment for Learning website includes multi-media support and materials such as classroom video footage and samples of children’s work with teacher commentary. There are also reflection tools and checklists to support individual teachers and school staff in reviewing current assessment practice (http://action.ncca.ie/primary.aspx).

Norway: Developing teacher capacity in formative assessment

In Norway, schools now have a statutory requirement to implement assessment for learning. To support teachers in fulfilling the requirements for formative assessment, the Directorate for Education and Training has created a website on assessment for learning providing a range of materials and tools including questions for reflection, films, assessment tools and literature, and also examples of different ways to document formative assessment practice.

At the same time, there has been a developing awareness that teachers have not traditionally received training in formative assessment and that there was very little expertise available nationally for school leaders to draw on to provide support. To address this, the Ministry of Education and Research and the Directorate for Education and Training in Norway identified formative assessment as a priority area for education policy and professional development and launched a range of support programmes and learning networks at the regional, local and school level. For example, the Assessment for Learning programme (2010-14) was organised in learning networks at the local and regional level, where practitioners could exchange experiences and create spaces for common reflection on effective practice. Participating municipalities and counties employed a formative assessment contact person to assist in running the project locally. These contact persons attended Assessment for Learning workshops run by the Directorate. The programme also provided online resources including tools and videos on how to enact effective formative assessment in the classroom.

assignments in a central register in Grades 5-10 was described as “formative assessment”. However, none of these assessment practices include the type of high-quality feedback to students on their learning and advice on the next steps to take to improve or succeed that is characteristic of formative assessment.

Identifying and overcoming the barriers to formative assessment

Most systems struggle to achieve a balance between assessment of, and for learning, even when promoting formative assessment as one of the key national policies for improvement (OECD, 2013d). Even relatively high-performing, well-resourced school systems with highly regarded teachers have struggled to reorient their assessment systems from assessment of learning for accountability towards assessment for student learning.

Building a culture and capacity for formative assessment takes time and sustained policies. The experience of countries that have made a concerted effort to strengthen formative assessment, such as Norway, highlights that success depends above all on teachers and the wider framework for evaluation and assessment (Box 2.10). It is imperative that teachers understand the value of formative assessment for their students’ learning, which will help to overcome professional resistance, and how to use it effectively in their classrooms. It is also critical that there is space for formative assessment in the evaluation and assessment framework, and that the pressure created by high-stakes examinations for students, teachers and schools is reduced.

Box 2.10. Barriers to formative assessment: Insights from Norway

In 2010 Norway introduced an Assessment for Learning programme that sought to improve assessment practice in schools by integrating the following four principles into the teaching practice. The principles state that students and apprentices learn better when they: 1) understand what to learn and what is expected of them; 2) obtain feedback that provides information on the quality of their work or performance; 3) are given advice on how to improve; and 4) are involved in their own learning process and in self-assessment.

The programme identified a number of barriers to strengthening assessment for learning in teaching practices.

1. Teachers’ resistance to change in teacher and student roles

The successful implementation of assessment for learning practices requires changing traditional teacher and student roles. Without this change, students will not use the feedback given to them. Teachers who are used to leading their classroom in conventional ways, such as teaching students from the blackboard and doing all the talking, can feel uneasy about a potential loss of control once more power is given to students. Students can also find the change difficult. They need to learn how to use feedback and how to have a dialogue with teachers and their peers about their learning, not just their test scores.

2. Shortcomings in teachers’ subject knowledge and assessment skills

Questions remain about the depth of subject knowledge teachers need in order to give effective feedback in their classrooms. They also need to be able to use assessment criteria and to have high levels of assessment literacy. Neither of these is particularly strong in initial teacher education in a number of education systems, Romania included.

3. Busy classrooms and the need for sustained support

Teachers need concrete examples of how to “do” assessment for learning, and they need tools to support their practice. Changing classroom practice is a slow process and needs sustained programmes of professional development. If teachers find themselves overwhelmed or too busy, they will not have the time or energy to use assessment for learning practices.
A national policy statement on formative assessment

Improving the use of formative assessment in Romania will hinge on teacher engagement. A strong national statement on why it matters for education in Romania would support this, building legitimacy and a sense of national value around formative assessment. While the 2011 Education Law does provide a place for formative assessment, it is not explicit enough about the central value and role that formative assessment should play in Romania. At the same time, the new centralised assessments, which effectively took some of the responsibility for student assessment out of the classroom, may have created an ambiguous message about the accuracy value of teachers’ professional judgement which is at the heart of formative assessment.

A national statement that provides a clear definition of what formative assessment is, how it applies to classrooms and teaching practices, and most importantly the rewards that it can provide for student learning will be important to raise the value accorded to formative assessment nationally. This will need to be underpinned by a comprehensive strategy that includes developing teachers’ skills in using assessment to support student learning, and reviewing the evaluation and assessment framework to create more space for formative assessment to develop.

Developing teachers’ assessment literacy

Assessment literacy can be understood as “an individual’s understandings of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions” (Popham, 2011). Teachers with strong assessment literacy will have both the skills and the confidence to use assessment for learning practice in their classrooms and to reach their own decisions about student development and learning. They will also be able to engage with more sophisticated forms of summative assessment and can make informed contributions to debates about the future development of national assessments and high-stakes examinations.

In Romania, the limited availability and lack of practical preparation in initial and continuing teacher education is not limited to formative assessment, but to Romanian teachers’ “assessment literacy” more broadly. Assessment is not sufficiently developed through initial teacher education, continuing professional development or in the guidance and support associated with classroom and external assessments.

Box 2.10. Barriers to formative assessment: Insights from Norway (continued)

4. High-stakes testing systems and administrative requirements

The pressures that systems of testing and high-stakes examinations impose on schools inevitably generate teaching to the test and a particular set of expectations on teachers and teaching. In such a situation, teaching is mostly centred on check-listing of test content and practising test items, and this practice is not just confined to the months before a particular test. In the face of high-stakes tests, students and their parents also expect this behaviour of teachers. Ironically, the kind of learning promoted by these practices is low-level memorisation with little higher order thinking or competency development. Preparing for tests can actually deny students the opportunities to develop the competencies for future learning and success.

The role of teacher education and professional development

Encouraging greater use of formative assessment and developing teachers’ overall understanding of how to use assessment in Romania will require significant efforts not just to develop teachers’ capacity for assessment, but to build their understanding and appreciation of why it matters. What teachers believe about assessment is at least as important in shaping their practice as what they know about it. Assessment beliefs may even be more important than assessment knowledge (James and Pedder, 2006; Xu and Brown, 2016). If, as in Romania, a teacher’s own educational experience as a student was dominated by tests and examinations, then it is difficult for them to develop an appreciation of alternative approaches or of the value of formative assessment.

This will mean giving far more priority to the study and practice of assessment in initial teacher education and continuing professional development. Currently, while initial teacher education does include a course on assessment and evaluation, it does not prepare teachers sufficiently in the learner-centred, inclusive approach to teaching and assessment that the new curriculum requires. Moreover, teaching preparation remains largely theoretical, and teachers have limited opportunity to develop and practise formative assessment skills (see Chapter 3).

Romania has recognised that its current initial teacher education is insufficient and is in the process of developing a new master’s for teacher education. If this is successfully implemented, it will need to include more thorough preparation on assessment and opportunities to practice assessment for new teachers. As Romania develops the assessment module of its new master’s it may draw on the experience of other countries. A recent project in New South Wales in Australia identified elements of initial teacher education that are particularly important for the development of teachers’ assessment literacy (Box 2.11).

**Box 2.11. Learning Assessment: An initiative in New South Wales, Australia**

New South Wales recently undertook work to ensure that teachers at the beginning of their careers had the assessment literacy needed to support assessment policy and practice in classrooms. This identified 24 elements now required in all initial teacher education programmes. Some of these are particularly relevant to Romania as it begins to generate its own list of key elements to support new policy directions in assessment:

1. Beginning teachers need to understand how teaching, learning, assessment, feedback and reporting can be aligned and integrated in practice.
2. Beginning teachers need to know the purposes of summative and formative assessment and how the two can be brought together. They need to know how to incorporate both purposes for assessment into teaching and learning programmes.
3. Beginning teachers need to know and understand how syllabus outcomes are written and how they can provide a guide to the types of knowledge and skills to be learned and to a variety of appropriate assessment tasks and activities.
4. Beginning teachers should have a working knowledge of the vocabulary of assessment. They should understand and be able to apply concepts of validity and reliability to the development of their own assessment activities and tasks and to broader measures such as examinations and standardised testing programmes.
5. Beginning teachers should understand the importance of developing criteria for judging different levels of performance in response to assessment activities or tasks.
Box 2.11. Learning Assessment: An initiative in New South Wales, Australia (continued)

6. Beginning teachers need to be able to formulate questions to help them analyse student performance for feedback to students and, just as importantly, to feed forward into their teaching.

7. Beginning teachers need to have practised and gained understanding of the professional skill of making judgements about student achievement against standards from evidence gained from assessment activities or tasks.

8. Beginning teachers should know about ways that the reliability of their judgements can be improved, for example through moderation.

9. Beginning teachers should be encouraged to develop a “mindset” towards assessment and its impact on learners.


Since initial teacher education only targets new teachers, and since assessment literacy is developed throughout a teacher’s career, it will also be important to integrate formative assessment strategies into continuous professional development. Financial constraints mean that the availability of in-service training is currently limited in Romania but the cost of a comprehensive programme to develop teachers’ assessment skills would be easily offset by the potential gains in terms of learner retention and achievement. The experience of other countries suggests that such training needs to be offered over a sustained period of time and combine courses with school-based support if it is to have an impact on teaching practice (Hopfenbeck, et al., 2013). One way to do this is to create local “assessment advisers” who work with schools to support the adoption of formative techniques; this could be a function of the school improvement unit that this review recommends Romania establish within each CSI (see Chapter 4). The effective use of formative assessment should also be prioritised within teacher appraisal and school evaluation standards (see Chapters 3 and 4). Some countries, such as Hungary, have also launched national awareness raising campaigns with professional content on assessment (Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). This can help to strengthen the reputation and acceptance of formative assessment, which will be important in Romania where the adoption of such practices will demand a considerable change in mindset not just among teachers but also parents, students and society at large.

As an immediate step, any continuous professional development programme introduced to implement the new curriculum should systematically include support for classroom assessment practice and focus on the areas that can provide most value for Romania. This might initially focus on developing teacher understanding of the why and how of providing feedback to students on the next stages in their learning, and creating a classroom context where students feel it is safe to make mistakes and are engaged in their own learning. The national assessments introduced by the 2011 Education Law have the potential to support these changes if they are developed further.
Using the national assessments to support assessment literacy

The new national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 were introduced to diagnose student learning as the basis for a more individualised approach. However, the individualised student learning plans and student portfolios that the assessment results were supposed to feed into have not been developed. The lack of accompanying guidance or support to help teachers use the assessments means that they do not seem to be supporting development of teachers’ assessment capacity. The OECD Review Team formed the impression on the basis of its interviews that some teachers see the assessments as an additional administrative requirement with little value for teaching and learning.

As a first step, given the diagnostic purpose of the assessments, it would make sense to move them to the beginning of the school year, so that teachers can use the results to establish students’ learning levels and put in place appropriate teaching and learning plans to reflect their students’ individual needs. The diagnostic purpose of the assessments would also be supported by the following elements:

Developing individualised learning plans and student portfolios

The individualised learning plans and student portfolios set out in the 2011 Education Law are positive tools to encourage more student-led, differentiated learning. If they are to have their intended impact, however, additional supports will be needed. Developing a central model and template for the student learning plan could help teachers to develop and use them in their classrooms. Central guidance on how assessment results should feed into the plan, and how teachers can interpret assessment results to guide future learning, would likewise be of value. Teachers also need orientation on how they can use the plan to engage students in a conversation about their own learning goals, so that the plans can also be used to develop students’ “learning to learn” competencies. Romania might learn from the practices of other countries in the use of individual learning plans (Box 2.12).

Student portfolios can encourage students to document and reflect on their learning progression. Many European countries are increasingly using student portfolios to engage students more actively in their own learning and assess a wider range of cross-cutting competencies, which traditional assessment formats do not permit.

Box 2.12. Countries’ experience of student learning plans

Alongside specific policy frameworks to encourage greater use of formative assessment, some countries have also adopted mandatory tools to support teachers’ use of formative assessment, including student learning plans:

Sweden: Individual Development Plans

In Sweden, the use of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) is compulsory in schools. The purpose of the IDP is to ensure that teachers and students focus on identifying individual learning goals and developing strategies to address any shortcomings. The IDPs include an assessment of the student’s current performance level in relation to the curriculum’s learning goals and focus on the steps that a student should take to reach those goals. School leaders are required to provide the overall structure and shape for the plans, and can choose to include additional information such as a student’s general development. If a student is experiencing difficulties, the school is required to develop plans as to how they will help the student to achieve their learning goals. The goals in the IDPs are used for student self-assessment, with students asked to rate their own progress and performance.
Box 2.12. Countries’ experience of student learning plans (continued)

Denmark: Individual Student Plans

In Denmark, mandatory Individual Student Plans (ISPs) were introduced in 2006 to document student learning progress. The ISPs contribute to formalising Danish assessment practice by documenting students’ learning progress for dialogue with key stakeholders (Shewbridge et al., 2011). They emphasise students’ future learning rather than summative learning outcomes. Official evaluations, strong support from national-level parents’ organisations and student associations (see Danish Ministry of Education and Rambøll, 2011) and stakeholder feedback confirm that the ISPs are well received by parents and teachers. In short, parents appreciate a written summary of their child’s progress because they feel that they are better prepared for their meeting with teachers. Teachers perceive the benefit of transferring documented information on students’ achievement to subsequent teachers and as such ISPs play a crucial role in tracking individual students’ developmental growth over time. Teachers recognise the role of ISPs in easing communication with parents. The added workload ISPs entail for teachers is a bone of contention, but there is a current pilot to allow educators more flexibility in determining and prioritising the content of ISPs.


Introducing a more teacher-led format for the national assessments

A more teacher-led assessment format would provide teachers with the space to exercise, and develop confidence in, their own professional judgement. Teachers would be responsible for the design of the assessment, initially in Grade 2 and then, if successful, in Grade 6. Teachers should be supported by a national item bank developed by the NCAE which could also provide details on which assessment items are suitable to assess which competencies in the curriculum. Central guidance on how to conduct the assessment will also be important. This could include a report template for reporting results to students and parents with a dedicated space for student feedback on how to improve. A sample of the reports might be externally checked for consistency. With these measures in place, teachers will be able to progressively develop their assessment capacity, so that they are able to select and develop their own assessment items to meet the individual needs of their students, enhancing the assessments’ diagnostic value.

Creating space for classroom-based assessment in the framework for evaluation and assessment

Increasing the priority accorded to formative assessment through a national policy statement, improving teacher preparation and providing central assessment tools for classroom use will all help to develop teachers’ assessment literacy. However teachers’ beliefs will not change unless there is a policy direction away from summative external assessments and examinations, and towards the professional judgement of teachers in their own classrooms. Scaling back external testing would be a practical expression of this new direction, as would decoupling test and examination results from teacher appraisal and school evaluation.
Revisiting the national assessments and examinations

External examinations in Romania continue to dominate conceptions of student assessment, leaving little space for formative assessment policy or practice. As in other countries, high visibility summative assessment is a significant barrier to the development of formative assessment practice (OECD, 2005a). While it is not unusual that external examinations like the Grade 8 and baccalaureate weigh heavily on education systems, their dominance in Romania is particularly marked.

In the immediate term, when Romania comes to revise the two examinations as part of its curriculum reform, it might review the composition of the final grades. This could mean moving to a more modular approach that includes more school-based projects. This would provide more space for feedback to students, the opportunity to assess cross-disciplinary competencies like collaboration and teamwork, and reduce the over-reliance on external pen-and-paper summative assessments. Over the medium to longer term, as discussed above, a review of the structure of schooling and reconsidering the use of the Grade 8 examination for tracking at 14 years will be central to supporting student learning and progression.

The evaluation and assessment framework

The predominance of summative student assessment is reinforced by the overall framework for evaluation and assessment in Romania. Student results in national examinations play a role in determining teachers’ salary bonuses. They are also part of school evaluation criteria, and successive poor examination results can result in the dismissal of a school’s management team. The public discourse on education is dominated by examination results, which is reinforced by the ministry’s national school rankings on the basis of examination results.

As discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 in this report, these practices need to change. Teacher appraisal needs to focus on teachers’ classroom practices, including formative assessment, rather than student scores in national examinations and in academic competitions. A stronger developmental appraisal is also a way to develop assessment literacy: teachers who are encouraged to reflect critically on their own pedagogical practices and development needs are likely to be better equipped to provide useful feedback to students in their classrooms, and to help students reflect critically on their own performance to encourage more self-aware learners (see Chapter 3). Moving school evaluation away from assessment and examination results to focus more on a critical reflection of school development will also be important (see Chapter 4). Ending the public ranking of schools and replacing it with a more holistic vision of a good school would also be a step towards educating parents and the wider community about what constitutes achievement in education. Across the system, assessments for ranking and selective rewards need to be reduced to make way for a stronger focus on improvement and the belief that every student, teacher and school can excel.

Policy Issue 2.4: Strengthening central capacity for assessment

Romania’s extensive system of national testing is not matched by its level of resources. Ensuring that there is the necessary capacity to develop modern testing in line with international developments is critical for the quality and reliability of high-stakes national examinations. It is also important for developing assessments and examinations that align with the new curriculum and the accompanying tools to build teachers’ assessment literacy. Reducing the scale of external assessments and examinations,
through more teacher-led assessment in Grades 2 and 6, and returning to a sample-based assessment in Grade 4 will free up some capacity that could be used to focus on improving test quality.

**Adequately resourcing the NCAE to ensure high-quality national assessments and examinations**

When the NCAE was established in 1998 it marked an important step in professionalising assessment in Romania. The NCAE has improved the reliability and quality of national examinations in recent decades and developed new assessments to support system-monitoring and school-assessment practice. However, over that period, while its responsibilities have increased significantly, it has not had a corresponding increase in investment. As result, it is now straining to administer the existing assessment and examination regime, and lacks the resources to lead improvements and keep up with international developments in assessment techniques.

Areas where investments are required include psychometricians proficient in modern test design and analysis including IRT, and research capacity for the continuous development of the examinations and assessments. It will also be important to invest in technology to support better data management and analysis. The use of technology to administer assessments and examinations could also help to reduce costs, and in the longer term make it possible to develop technology-enabled testing, such as adaptive assessments that provide more personalised testing and fine-grained information on student learning. Without these investments, it will be difficult for the NCAE to ensure the validity and reliability of national examinations, which is critical given their high stakes for students’ future.

It will also be difficult to develop the existing Grade 4 assessment into a standardised tool for system-monitoring without increasing investment. Nearly all OECD and EU countries now conduct their own standardised national assessments (OECD, 2015). The absence of such a monitoring tool in Romania is a significant gap, which means that the country does not have the means to reliably monitor student outcomes from year to year against national expectations for learning, or to compare learning outcomes across different groups of students, which is essential for equity monitoring (see Chapter 5).

This chapter has also highlighted other gaps in the resources available for student assessment that limit the capacity of assessment to support teaching and learning. The NCAE will have a leading role in addressing some of these gaps, in particular, strengthening learning standards and ensuring that they are reflected in the design, marking and reporting of assessments and examinations. It will also have a leading role in developing teacher supports such as item banks and assessment reporting templates to support teachers’ assessment literacy. This work is critical for the development of assessment in Romania, however at present the NCAE has no spare capacity to undertake it.

It will be important that any consideration of resources is linked to a wider review of the Centre’s roles and responsibilities. This review should focus on identifying those activities that the Centre is well placed to undertake, and those which might be better conducted by other bodies or parts of the ministry. In particular, the organisation of the textbook evaluation process, which is rarely conducted by a national examination centre, might be more appropriately undertaken by another body or unit in the ministry. Relieving the Centre of such activities would allow it to focus on its core activities, such as ensuring the quality of the examinations and assessments.
This review recommends that Romania give careful consideration to the structure of secondary pathways before introducing any new examinations, such as an examination or qualification at the end of compulsory education. If Romania does proceed with reforms to examinations in secondary education, it will be important that these be adequately resourced so that any new assessment is well designed and its implementation effectively supported. The recent introduction of the new national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 took place without sufficient investment in accompanying resources, such as student learning plans, portfolios or guidance for teachers on how to use the assessments. This has limited their value and largely prevented them from serving their intended purpose as a diagnostic and formative tool for teachers and students.

Ensuring that the NCAE has the analytical capacity and international exposure needed to lead continuous improvement

It is important for the quality of Romania’s national examinations and assessments that the NCAE can lead their continuous improvement. A key part of this is being able to analyse how students overall, and in different groups, respond to the test items that it produces. This would give the NCAE the information it needs to continually improve the quality of its items, and to ensure test fairness by seeing how different groups of students perform across different items. Understanding how performance differs across key groups nationally will also be important for the NCAE to ensure representative student sampling for the revised Grade 4 assessment.

At present the NCAE produces an annual report following each national assessment, and, in the past, following the Grade 8 and 12 examinations. While the reports on the national assessments set out student results by item they do not break down student performance across key groups, such as by socio-economic group or gender. Partly due to the NCAE’s lack of capacity, the IES has recently analysed the Grade 8 mock results. It analyses results by some contextual variables, such as regional economic development. It also included comments on the test design, such as the curriculum’s competencies not being well reflected in the examination content, or that the examination should be accompanied by a student background questionnaire (IES, 2016). Such insights are important for continuous test development, making it essential that the design and administration of the national examinations and assessment remain closely related to results analysis.

Continuous development is also supported through engagement in international assessments. The IES is now responsible for leading Romania’s engagement in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which means that the NCAE is no longer involved in any international large-scale assessment of student learning. While this move reflects a positive acknowledgement of the importance of using the PISA results to conduct national analysis, it is important that the NCAE continues to benefit from the learning opportunities that PISA participation provides. International assessments, and particularly an assessment like PISA that aims to assess competence, provides useful exposure to international assessment techniques. This might mean that the NCAE regularly meets with the IES to be informed about PISA’s technical developments and assessment techniques, and perhaps joins the IES at international PISA meetings on the assessment’s implementation.
Strengthening the NCAE’s technical independence

The NCAE’s programme of work and decisions on assessment policy are decided by the ministry. While MNESR involvement is important, since it is ultimately responsible for education, it is also necessary to ensure that the NCAE has an independent voice so that important national decisions on assessment policy are adequately informed by specialised assessment expertise. This independence could be supported by the creation of a governing board for the NCAE, which would oversee its work and be involved in key decisions regarding its programme of work and its budget, and provide expert independent advice to government on assessment policy.

Such a board could be composed of national experts in student assessment policy and practice. This should include a representative from the IES to ensure coherence and coordination, and so that the board can draw on the IES’s expertise and research. Including one or more international experts would help to ensure that the NCAE’s work is informed by international developments and strengthen its independence from national politics.

Conclusion and recommendations

Romania has a compelling need to reorient its student assessment towards a greater focus on teachers’ professional judgement and away from external assessment. Creating space for more teacher-led assessment, especially formative assessment, and supporting teachers to interpret and use assessment results to provide high-quality feedback and differentiate their teaching will raise the quality of learning for all students. This is a significant change, not just for student assessment but also for the evaluation and assessment framework, education system, and society in general. To support this shift, parents and the public will need to be engaged in an evidence-based discussion on the role of assessment and how it can best support student learning.

Recommendations

2.1. Align student assessment with the learning goals of the new curriculum

2.1.1. Strengthen the curriculum’s learning standards in the core domains of reading and writing, and mathematics so that they become the key reference for classroom and external assessment, supporting alignment with the curriculum (Figure 2.3). This should include providing marked examples of student work that demonstrate national expectations. Using the current scales for classroom marking to set out levels of performance within the national learning standards would also help teachers to relate the standards to their own classroom practices and establish a common language for describing performance.

2.1.2. Use the national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 to reinforce the learning standards. The national assessments focus on the new curriculum’s core competencies, potentially providing a valuable means to communicate expected standards and reliably benchmark individual student performance against them. For this to happen, however, the assessments need to be accompanied by guidance on how to interpret students’ work, in line with learning standards. The reporting of results also needs to be aligned with the learning standards, so that teachers, students and parents have a clear understanding of the extent to which a student has sufficiently mastered core competencies and of any potential gaps and difficulties in learning.
2.1.3. Clarify which part of the government will be responsible for the further development of learning standards, to ensure that this work is given sufficient priority. Whichever agency assumes responsibility, close co-operation between IES and NCAE will be essential, as will adequate funding.

2.2. Mitigate the negative impact of national examinations on student learning and progression

2.2.1. Improve the quality and fairness of the Grade 8 examination as a first priority. The range of competencies and domains assessed should be broadened to provide a more rounded assessment of student learning and help to encourage learning across the breadth of the curriculum. Reducing the classroom-based marks that contribute to the final mark to Grades 7 and 8 will help to avoid that stakes are associated with classroom work, and focus teachers and students on learning rather than demonstrating performance, in the early years of lower secondary. The accuracy and reliability of classroom-based marks for Grades 7 and 8 should be improved through “moderation” based on teacher discussions in schools on the standard of student work and appropriate marking and an overall effort to improve teachers’ assessment literacy (see Recommendation 2.3.2 and 2.3.3). As this improves, the classroom-based marks may account for a greater share of the overall Grade 8 mark.

2.2.2. Review pathways and certification in secondary education to ensure that all students benefit from equal education opportunities for longer and gain meaningful recognition for their achievements. This should involve a critical review of when and how students choose and are selected for different secondary school programmes, and give consideration to ending the Grade 8 examination for selection into upper secondary.

2.3. Develop teachers’ assessment literacy

2.3.1. Develop a national policy statement on the value of formative assessment and why it matters for education in Romania, underpinned by a strategy to promote its use. This could be complemented by a national awareness raising campaign to help teachers and society fully appreciate its significance for learning.

2.3.2. Ensure that teachers’ initial and continuous education provides them with a stronger basis in assessment. The new Masters of Arts in teaching is an opportunity to ensure that initial teacher education provides new teachers with a strong grounding in the theory of assessment combined with sufficient opportunities to practice assessment, particularly formative methods. In-service training on assessment should be expanded, and professional development programmes on the new curriculum should systematically include support to help teachers assess competencies and use assessment to shape teaching and student learning. Romania could consider creating “assessment advisors” to work with schools to help them use formative assessment techniques, located in Romania’s new school improvement units in the CSIs (see Recommendation 4.4.4 in Chapter 4).

2.3.3. Make greater use of the national assessments in Grades 2 and 6 to develop teachers’ assessment skills and improve the quality of feedback. Giving teachers responsibility for designing the assessments will give them more space to exercise and develop confidence in their personal judgement and to give more detailed feedback to students on their performance. To enable this, teachers should be provided with central support such as a reporting template and a national item bank to ensure that they assess student learning in line with the curriculum’s expectations and are able to provide useful feedback to students on how to improve.
This practice could initially be trialled in Grade 2, and later extended to Grade 6 if successful. Guidance on how to develop individual learning plans on the basis of student results would help teachers to use the assessments more effectively for formative purposes. Moving the assessments to the beginning of the school year would also reinforce their formative function.

2.3.4 Encourage schools and teachers to focus on formative assessment by increasing the value it has in teacher appraisal and school evaluation, while reducing the weight given to the results of high-stakes examinations in line with the measures recommended below (see Recommendations 3.4.3. and 4.2.3 in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively).

2.4. Strengthen central capacity for assessment

2.4.1. Adequately resource the NCAE. Increase the NCAE’s resources so that it can invest in psychometricians proficient in modern test design, technology for better data management, results analysis and research capacity to improve the design and quality of national examinations, and provide the support and teacher guidance to accompany the national assessments as recommended in this review (see Recommendation 3.3). Consideration of the Centre’s resources should also be linked to a review of its role and responsibilities, to identify which activities it is well placed to undertake and those which might be better conducted by other bodies or parts of the Ministry, such as the textbook evaluation process.

2.4.2. Ensure that the NCAE has the analytical capacity and international exposure to lead continuous improvement. Making it an objective to conduct more extensive analysis of its examination and assessment results, and developing the capacity to do so, will be important to ensure the validity and reliability of national test items. Some form of continued involvement for the NCAE in international assessments would also help support ongoing modernisation in national assessment design.

2.4.3. Strengthen the NCAE’s voice as a centre of technical assessment expertise by creating a governing board. This should be composed of national experts, including a representative from the IES to ensure coherence and co-ordination in student assessment policy, and an international expert or experts so that the NCAE’s work is informed by international developments.

Note

1. Some arts and sports schools as well as theological and military high schools (“vocational schools”) continue to organise their own entrance examinations to test students’ aptitude in specific skills areas (arts or sports).
References


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