

1.0 Overview

This preliminary report presents policy suggestions resulting from a peer-counselling activity in Lithuania. Peer counselling brings together peers from national administrations/agencies to advise a country in a process of policy development. Peers provide the country with advice and feedback based on experiences from their own national context. Peers' recommendations are intended to feed into concrete policy solutions for the country. Implementation of the recommendations remains the full responsibility of the country that initiated the peer counselling.

This peer-counselling activity, which was co-organised by the European Commission and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Lithuania, focused on improving the quality of student assessment in the Lithuanian education system. Policy suggestions for the Lithuanian government and school stakeholder community address:

1. support for the reform process (general recommendations, Section 2.0)
2. support to teachers to integrate formative assessment in classroom practices (Section 3.0)
3. the design of a moderation system of internal school assessments to ensure reliable and consistent marking at schools (Section 4.0)
4. the redesign of the school graduation requirements and university admissions (Section 5.0).

For each of these topics, the concrete questions and challenges are set out. These are based on input of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science Sport in its initial concept note. Strengths upon which Lithuania can build are derived from discussions of the first meeting of peer counselors and Lithuanian stakeholders, as well as the Inception Report.

The first peer counselling visit to Vilnius took place on 17-18 September 2019, and included peers from four EU Member States (France, Ireland, Italy and Norway). Meeting participants included: representatives of Lithuanian stakeholder groups (teacher trainers, university researchers, the parent organisation, the student organisation and of non-formal education providers) and of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport). They engaged in active discussions on challenges related to assessment reforms. A second visit is scheduled for **XXX 2020 and** will provide the opportunity to deepen discussion of key issues and to provide practical advice in the early stages of reform.¹

Background and context

Lithuania aims to improve the quality and equity of its students' learning outcomes. The latest results of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 show that in reading, mathematics and science mean performance is below the EU average. The proportion of underachieving pupils in all three subjects tested remain practically unchanged since 2015 (OECD, 2019) and higher than the EU average and the other Baltic countries. Gender differences in performance are rather small or not significant in mathematics and science, but are sizeable in reading where girls outperform boys by 39 points as compared to EU average of 27.

PISA data also reveal urban/rural disparities in student performance in Lithuania. PISA 2018 data show that in Lithuania students in urban schools score 78 points higher in reading than students in rural schools. Yet on average across EU MS countries, the academic performance gap between rural and urban students disappears completely after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile. In Lithuania (as in Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Spain), rural students actually outperform students in urban areas when the socio-economic profile of schools and individual students are taken into account (Echazarra, A. and T. Radinger, 2019).

Lithuania's National School Evaluation Agency (NSEA) has found that most schools have not been able to improve student learning outcomes. Based on lesson observations, the NSEA has highlighted ineffective assessment as a main contributor to poor student outcomes. They observe the need to improve teachers' competences for formative assessment (LT Concept paper).

Formative assessment (which is sometimes referred to as assessment *for* learning, as contrasted with assessment *of* learning through summative tests, whether written and oral) focuses on identifying student progress and learning needs to shape teaching and learning strategies. When practiced systematically, it can support learners at all levels to improve.

Lithuania notes that its "strict academic tradition" (its pedagogical culture) has been maintained since independence. Upper secondary graduation and university admissions centre on the matura examination and centralised university enrolment procedures. School and individual teacher's assessments play little role in students' final score. While the focus on the matura examination is part of this strict academic tradition, it is also a useful means to fight corruption in accessing higher education (e.g. purchasing grades or other favourable treatment). At the same time there are negative consequences, as high-stakes external examinations may create incentives for teachers to "teach to the test" in order to help students achieve high scores, while not necessarily support learning (Koretz, 2005; Lithuania Concept paper, 2019). This approach also undermines trust in teacher professionalism.

Proposed reforms to strengthen assessment in Lithuania also intersect with plans to introduce new competence-based curricula, to strengthen teacher training and to strengthen trust and accountability. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of evaluation and assessment within the overall education ecosystem.

2.0 General Recommendations

The general recommendations set out in this section focus on broad principles for effective reforms related to student assessment (formative and summative) and upper secondary graduation and university admissions in Lithuania. They are based on advice provided by peers following intensive discussions over the course of the first meeting:

- **Communicate effectively what changes are being made and why (including evidence of effectiveness).** A public media campaign can help raise awareness on the aims of new policies. Such a campaign can also communicate support for teachers as they implement. "A positive focus on what is working well in the education system, and how things can be improved further can be ... [very] effective" (Peer).
- **Develop a shared understanding of desired student learning outcomes and competences and the policy reforms and implementation strategies to achieve**

them. New competence-based curricula defining the knowledge, skills and attitudes students will need to thrive in life and work are being developed. The new curricula continue to place a focus on acquisition of knowledge also emphasise the ability to apply knowledge in relevant contexts, as well as competences related to personal development (social and emotional), citizenship, culture, and so on. “The main thing is to make sure change is done right, with everybody following in the same direction from the start and everybody understanding what needs to be done” (Peer).

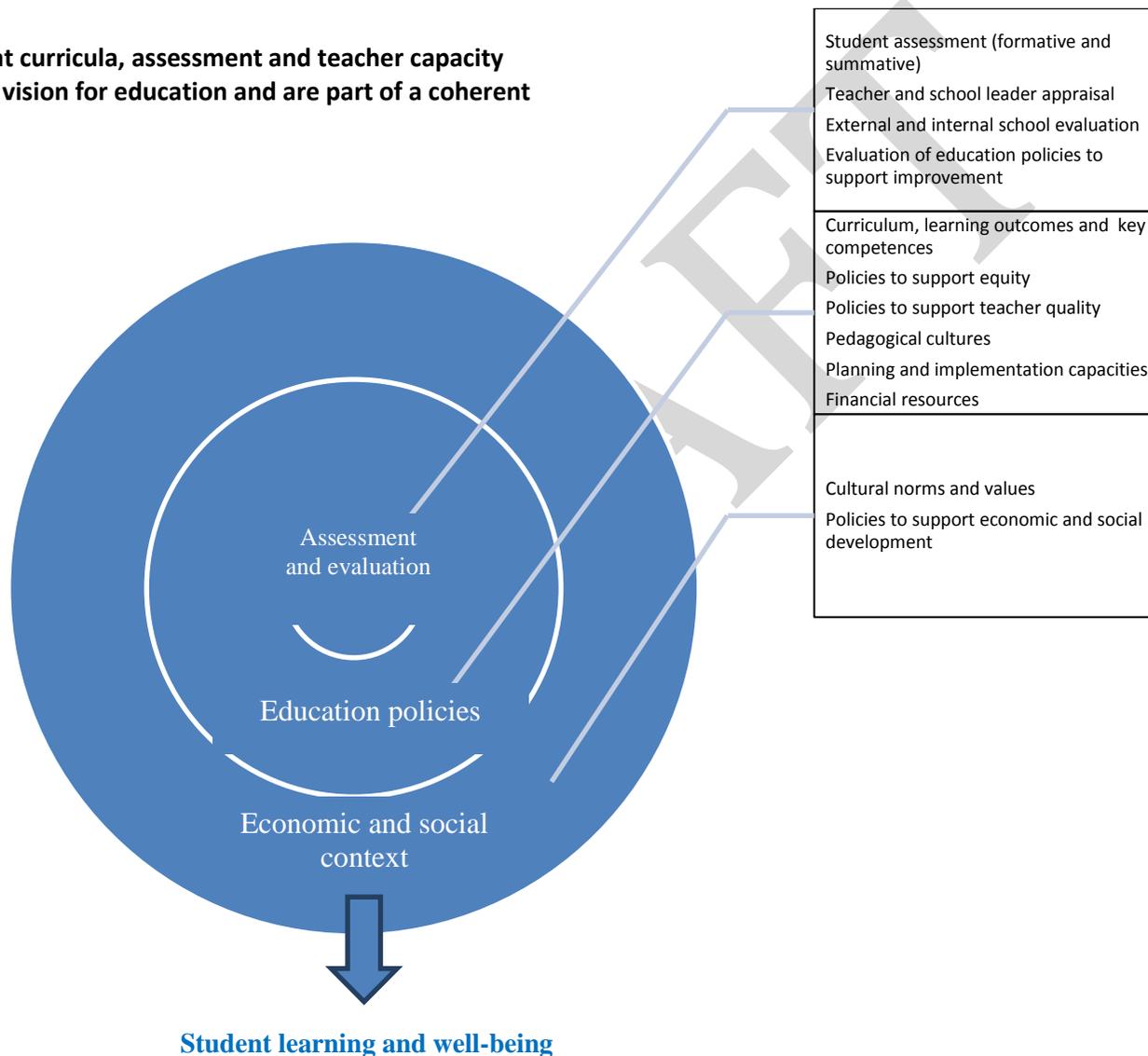
- **Ensure that curricula, assessment and teacher capacity support the overall vision for education and are part of a coherent strategy.** It will be important to ensure that assessment approaches and teachers’ initial training and professional development are aligned with the new curricula and are part of a coherent reform strategy. If school leaders have the capacity to support and drive the process, reform implementation will be more successful. Coherence across these different elements can ensure that each reinforces and supports the overall vision. It is important to “...know what capacity is needed now, and what capacity will be needed in the future. Teachers will want strategies, and [will] need some understanding for them to work effectively...” (Peer).
- **Ensure visible leadership.** While the overall vision and policies set the direction for change, visible leadership is also needed to drive the reform process. Roles and responsibilities at the national, municipal and school levels as well as stakeholder groups should be made clear. Visibility may also come in the form of national legislation or national initiatives to support pilot programmes, research, development and implementation of assessment reforms. “There is a need to have the “big picture”, a clear leader and direction” (LT stakeholder).
- **Ensure ongoing and inclusive stakeholder engagement.** Including stakeholders throughout the reform process will contribute to the reform’s success. Representatives from key stakeholder groups such as teachers, teacher educators, parents, students, NGOs, and others groups can ensure that a range of viewpoints is taken into account in the design and implementation of reforms. “All the stakeholders are there. There is just a need to communicate” (Peer).
- **Set and agree priorities for change by defining clear targets/milestones.** It is important to allow sufficient time for change and pace ambitions. Having a step-by-step implementation/action plan will provide the necessary structure and support monitoring of change/reform. “Change is a continuous process, and you will always want to change things and do better” (Peer).
- **Ensure that teachers have time to participate in school-based collaborative learning.** Teachers will need sufficient time for reflection, peer learning, preparation as they try new approaches to classroom-based formative assessment. In addition, moderation of teacher-scored summative assessments will require time for teachers to develop shared understandings of expected performance levels. This might mean reducing teaching schedules if necessary to schedule time for in-service and/or school-based competence development. Teachers need “...both time and space to develop [their] competences” (Peer).
- **Promote Lithuanian-based research to support evidence-based policy making.** Lithuania can benefit from international research and best practice examples on effective formative and summative assessments. A stronger Lithuanian evidence base

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will be important for helping teachers to adapt new practices to their classroom contexts and to build on what is working. “You have to make sure the change is your own and based within your own system” (Peer).

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Figure 1: Ensure that curricula, assessment and teacher capacity support the overall vision for education and are part of a coherent strategy



2.0 Recommendations on integrating formative assessment in school classroom teaching and learning

Context: As set out above, Lithuania's National School Evaluation Agency (NSEA) has highlighted ineffective assessment as a main contributor to poor student outcomes. They observe the need to improve teachers' competences for formative assessment (LT Concept paper). Indeed, research has found significant positive evidence of formative assessment practices on student learning, including for lower achieving students. It is thus an effective strategy to support quality and equity in education.

Lithuania refers to research by Black and Wiliam (2001), defining formative assessment as:

"Those activities undertaken by the teacher, and by their students in assessing themselves (that is, students' assessment of their own work as well as their peers), which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the needs."

Formative assessment is thus seen as a dynamic process, integrated in teaching and learning (and not as a separate step following completion of teaching units).

Concrete questions:

- How can Lithuania motivate teachers in Lithuania, from primary through upper secondary levels, to improve their competences to use formative assessment?
- What are the specific steps that can be taken to support systematic use of formative assessment to support student learning in Lithuanian classrooms?

Challenges:

Lithuania has identified barriers to implementation of formative assessment:

- Currently in Lithuania there is no widely shared understanding of the benefits of formative assessment or what effective formative assessment looks like in practice.
- Classroom-based formative assessment represents a significant departure from Lithuania's 'strict academic tradition', particularly at lower and upper secondary school levels. Both teachers and parents may resist reforms that depart from their own experience of schooling, or ideas about how students learn most effectively.
- The high-stakes matura examination provides incentives for teachers to align teaching and assessment to the requirements of this standardised examination – emphasising test performance at the expense of learning goals (understanding and mastering new knowledge and how to use it in context).
- Formative assessment may be seen as an additional task for teachers who feel or perceive themselves as already overburdened.

Strengths

- The introduction of new competence-based curricula will be piloted in 2021 and will be implemented in stages beginning in 2022. The new curricula will provide the opportunity to introduce new pedagogies and classroom-based formative assessment. Formative assessment, with its iterative approach to identifying learner progress and understanding, is well-suited to helping learners to apply their knowledge in new contexts, and for learners to assess the quality of their own and their peers' work.

The Ministry has noted that work on developing standards and criteria that set clear expectations for student achievement within the new competence-based curricula is ongoing (Curriculum Renewal Guidelines were developed in Summer 2019 and were then negotiated with the stakeholders and approved in November 2019. The actual curriculum development groups are expected to start their work on subject syllabus in February 2020.) New assessment tools, for both formative and summative assessment, are to be aligned with these standards and criteria.

- The focus of this Peer Counselling Activity on formative assessment as a means to support greater quality and equity of student learning outcomes demonstrates policy level support. In addition, the previous Peer Counselling Activity on coherent career pathways for teachers can also reinforce the need efforts to build teachers' assessment literacy. The previous Activity recommended the development of a teacher competence framework, articulating the basic competences that a beginning teacher needs (which would typically include and emphasis on assessment) and incentives and opportunities for teachers to further develop throughout their careers. Lithuania has since developed a competence framework, which may be used to guide teacher development, and this can be used to support teachers as they develop their assessment literacy.

Lithuania is also now benefitting from Commission's support for teacher education. This presents an opportunity to train teacher educators in formative and summative assessment methods, and to ensure that assessment literacy for competence-based curriculum is adequately covered in initial teacher education.

Policy suggestions

- **Establish formative assessment as a priority and communicate the rationale with stakeholders** including international evidence of improvements in: student learning outcomes (including for low achieving students), student motivation, student capacity for self- and peer-assessment and greater autonomy in their learning. A range of policy strategies to support formative assessment (policy dialogue with stakeholders; legislation; inclusion of formative assessment within the Lithuanian teacher competence framework; strategic investment of resources; etc.) will ensure greater visibility and support for formative assessment.
- **Ensure that teachers develop competences for formative assessment.** Create dedicated courses for formative assessment in initial teacher education and continuing professional development. These include competences to plan activities that will elicit evidence of student learning (classroom questioning and dialogue and classwork and task design), to activate students as agents of their own learning, to

provide exemplars of successful work, to give effective task-oriented feedback and to adapt teaching to support students to meet learning goals.

- **Develop tools to support formative assessment.** Tools may include guidelines, exemplars, and/or rubrics setting out performance standards and criteria to rate student performance. In addition, tracking tools, digital tools, and other practical teaching resources aligned with the competence-based curricula.
- **Support partnerships between university researchers and schools** to evaluate implementation and monitor impact of formative assessment. The effectiveness of formative assessment practices, will ultimately depend on classroom conditions, and impact may vary from one implementation to the next. Researchers can help teachers to build their confidence and experience as they test different approaches to understand what works well in their context.
- **Support collaboration** in schools or across school networks as a way to share effective practices.

Norway introduced new regulations on individual student assessment in 2009. These regulations established students' "right" to formative assessment, and to have their learning needs taken into account. Teachers thus need to understand each student's learning needs and abilities, and to then give appropriate feedback and support. In 2010, Norway launched the national Assessment for Learning (AfL) programme (2010 – 2018) to support teachers across the country to develop their competences for formative assessment.

Under the AfL programme, students were also given an active role in their own learning and assessment. The programme is based on four principles of quality assessment. Teachers should:

- help students to understand what to learn and what is expected of them
- provide each student with feedback on their work
- provide each student with advice on how to improve
- create opportunities for each student to be involved in their own learning process and self-assessment

Emphasis is also placed on creating a learning environment where students feel safe to make mistakes as they are learning new things.

Evaluations of the AfL programme have found that it has led to:

- a more learning-driven assessment culture
- improvements in understanding of learning aims in curriculum and more active use of it (e.g. more frequent classroom discussions of learning goals and how they will be assessed)
- improvements in teachers' knowledge of formative assessment methods
- more consistent use of assessment terminology
- fewer appeals of course grades
- enhanced learning and improved assessment practice among teachers participating in learning networks established as part of the AfL programme.

- local-level implementation (local school authorities and school leaders have been drivers of the development process)

Norwegian teachers have indicated they want more training for formative assessment, including through online courses (MOOCs).

In **Ireland**, schools provide both formative and summative assessment across the school years (in early primary years, assessment is almost exclusively formative).

Currently, students in lower secondary school are assessed by a final examination that is externally set (60% of the final mark), administered and marked in a maximum of 10 subjects at the end of lower secondary. In each of these subjects, students also have two classroom-based assessments that are marked by their teacher. The result appears in the final report at the end of this phase of education. Students receive marks as well as comprehensive feedback. At the end of upper secondary, as well, there is a final externally set, administered and marked examination for every subject.

Recent reforms in Ireland place a strong focus on improving professional development for both teachers and school leaders to improve their assessment competences. However, on upper secondary, Ireland has found that the high-stakes summative assessment dominates, and there is very little focus on formative assessment at this stage.

Italy has a strong focus on summative assessment. There are challenges to introducing new competence-based curricula and new assessment method, primarily related to the need to change teacher perspectives to a focus on teaching and learning of competences. To some extent, digital tools have supported teachers to integrate formative assessment in teaching by providing data on the extent to which students have achieved the competence goals set out in the curriculum, and areas where teaching may need to be adapted to support student learning. Teachers participating in initial and in-service training and have found descriptions of the competence levels assessed in standardised assessments (as is done for PISA) to be very useful.

Italy has found that successful reforms must tap into motivations for change, involve all key players, and provide very practical tools to support teachers.

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Italy has found that successful reforms must tap in to motivations for change, involve all key players, and provide very practical tools to support teachers.

In **France** teachers have been encouraged to make use of formative assessment for quite a few years. It is seen as a way to strengthen teaching practice and to support effective classroom interactions.

Student self-assessment is also emphasised as a way to support student autonomy. Communication with parents is essential for this to be effective. This is even more crucial when schools decide eliminate grades. Some primary schools and, to a lesser extent, some secondary schools, experiment with comment-only assessments (i.e. students do not receive grades). In general, there is significant resistance from teachers, students and parents to this approach.

In more and more subjects, students in France are also assessed according to competences and skills (i.e. their ability to apply knowledge in context). For instance, in foreign languages curricula and student assessment have been competence-based for many years.

4.0 Topic 2: Recommendations on introducing moderated teacher assessments

Context: Prior to 2018, decisions related to upper secondary school graduation and university entrance in Lithuania are based on the matura examination. The focus on this single, high-stakes examination for a subject is intended, in part, to prevent corruption (LT Concept Paper) (e.g. in “buying” grades or paying for admission to the university). However, decisions based on this single high-stakes examination provide an incomplete picture of student achievement. Beginning in 2019, students applying for a state-financed placement have also been required to submit course marks. Admissions decisions for the desired programme of study continue to be based solely on the results of the matura examinations. The Ministry is considering introducing a university admissions process which balances external and internal assessments. This could mean maintaining the current standardised matura examination, but also including teacher-based assessments as a percentage of the overall admissions score.

At the same time, Lithuania has noted that there is a lack of trust in reliability of teacher-moderated assessments. That is, teacher scoring may vary across schools. This is due, in part, to a lack of clarity of assessment standards and criteria (leading to inconsistent interpretations of standards of performance-based examinations, and thus inconsistent scoring).

Research highlights that reliability of teachers’ summative assessment depends on the design of assessment tools and teacher training. In a review of the empirical literature, for example, the Assessment Reform Group (2004) in the UK found significant evidence that “finer specification of criteria”, along with descriptions of progressive levels of competence, support reliable teacher assessments (Rowe and Hill, 1996 cited in ARG 2004). Greater clarity regarding goals for student work ensures that teachers consistently apply assessment criteria (Hargreaves et al., 1996, cited in ARG, 2004) and avoid bias toward groups of students, and post-test moderation to detect patterns of bias and adjust judgments.

In addition to the development of detailed criteria, teachers may develop shared understandings of standards and performance levels through moderation meetings within and across schools and through the use of exemplars on how criteria are applied in practice (Harlen, 1994).

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In practice, there are different ways to organise the moderation process. For example, in both Denmark and Norway, centrally appointed external examiners correct examination papers and may also mark student performance on oral examinations (relying on national standards and performance criteria). In the Netherlands, teachers mark their own students' examinations, and these are then moderated by a teacher from another school, based on a central scoring protocol. This process is organised by school boards. Further moderation by an external body is provided if necessary (Kavli, 2019; OECD, 2013). In other countries, moderation may be done between cooperating schools on a more informal basis, although documentation of decisions is always important (Peer).

Concrete questions:

- What policies are necessary to ensure that teacher led marking in schools is reliable and comparable?
- What support is necessary for such changes in school culture?

Challenges:

- Lithuania has noted that there is a lack of trust in reliability of teacher-moderated assessments. This is due, in part, to a lack of clarity of assessment standards and criteria (leading to inconsistent interpretations of standards, and thus inconsistent scoring).
- Lack of trust in teachers' professional judgement is also an important challenge.

Strengths:

- The inclusion of multiple assessments may help to ease the pressure on teachers and students to perform well on a single, high-stakes test.
- Teacher-rating is more effective to capture student capacity to solve complex problems or to communicate orally than is possible with standardised examinations.
- The inclusion of scores from additional assessments scores will provide a better picture of student learning over time.

Policy suggestions:

- **Ensure stakeholder buy-in for moderated teacher assessments** - It is important to make the value of teacher-marked summative assessments clear to all stakeholders. A culture shift focused on strengthening trust in teacher judgement will be needed.
- **Develop clear standards and criteria aligned with new competence-based curricula** and grounded in research on student development. Standards documents may include examples of how these may be applied in scoring student performance (including for schools with different socio-demographic profiles).
- **Introduce assessments that are more effectively aligned with competence-based curricula.** Performance-based assessments with observations of a range of tasks,

portfolios and other assessments forms can capture competences, such as the ability to solve complex problems. Teachers may use validated scoring rubrics that are based on central standards and criteria to rate student performances. Rubrics typically set out categories for which performance is to be rated, with definitions and examples, and a rating scale for each component.

- **Embed training on how to mark exams in teachers' initial and continuous education.** Teachers need the opportunity to discuss standards and criteria to ensure they have a shared understanding of what is required for different marks and to ensure reliability and consistency of marks. Guidelines and exemplars of how standards may be applied in different contexts may also support development of shared understanding.
- **Allow time for teachers to develop shared understanding of expected performances and for moderation.** This will provide help ensure greater reliability of marking across schools and will also a valuable opportunity for peer learning. As noted in the general recommendations, teaching schedules may need to be reduced to ensure teachers are able to devote the attention necessary.
- **Ensure transparency of marking.** Create a system for documentation of marks, so that teachers and schools may address any challenges and ensure transparency of the process.

Ireland has attempted to introduce moderated teacher summative assessments in order to balance high-stakes of external assessments. However, teachers view themselves as advocates for their students, and they have resisted taking on a greater role in summative assessments that contribute marks to final state examination scores. A lesson learned is that early efforts are needed to get teacher views on proposed changes.

Norway sets out guidelines on student marks for summative assessments, but does not have any kind of formal external control to ensure reliability of teacher marks. Rather, teachers participate actively in peer networks, and are able to a common understanding of performance and marks in lower secondary schools. Many teachers are also involved in grading external examinations, so this also helps establish a common understanding regarding performance expectations.

5.0 Topic 3: Recommendations on reforming school graduation and university admissions

Context:

In Lithuania, the results of the matura examination serve two purposes:

- certification at the end of secondary education (a minimum of 2 subject area examinations), and
- ranking for entrance to and financial support for university studies

Prior to 2019, university admission in Lithuania was based solely on the results of on the matura examination. Since 2019, students seeking a state-financed placement in a higher

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education institution have been required to submit results of the matura examination as well as course marks from their last year of upper secondary studies. However, admission to the students' chosen study programme is still calculated solely on the basis of the matura examination results. The examination therefore continues to have extremely high stakes for students.

All students must take a 'mother tongue' examination (choosing to take either the state examination or one designed by the school). The remaining (11) exams are state-designed examinations. Tasks are based on the national curriculum requirements. The examinations include different types of tasks, with some placing greater emphasis on disciplinary knowledge and skills and others focusing more on application of knowledge. More than 70 percent of all examination tasks are open ended. They are scored by secondary school teachers who have been trained to apply standards and criteria. Examination results are based on a 100 point-scale. The assessors are externally-appointed and scoring is carried out in designated examination centres using a double-blind approach. E-marking tools are also used. The examinations are scored by externally-appointed assessors in the designated examination centers.

Students may apply to several study programmes in different universities through a centralised admission system. Admissions, which are competitive, are based on the student's matura examination results and their final average mark in the subjects they wish to pursue at the schools to which they apply.

Since 2018, students have had the option to prepare projects in lieu of the final examination to earn their matura. This can be done for all subjects. The results of the matura project are then combined with the students' grades for the score for . About 200 of 30 000 students take this option.

As described under topic 2, Lithuania is considering introducing a university admissions process which balances external and internal assessments. This could mean maintaining the current standardised matura examination, but also including teacher-based assessments as a percentage of the overall admissions score.

On a more general level, inclusion of both external and internal assessments will also require that higher education institutions trust teachers' professional judgments (OECD, 2013). Lithuania has launched reforms to strengthen teacher training and offer better working conditions (e.g. through full-time pay). Assessment reforms, if shown to result in valid and reliable assessments of student learning, may also reinforce teacher professionalism.

Concrete questions:

- How to balance external and internal school assessments for school graduation?
- What are the examples of assessing competences and recognizing them as part of compulsory school graduation requirements in other countries?

Challenges:

- The strong focus on the matura examination as the sole measure of student attainment influences "teaching to the test" (with this narrow focus meaning that not all curricular elements are included).

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- While many universities have not required high scores on the matura examination for admission, this high-stakes examination nevertheless is seen to have a negative effect on student well-being.
- In addition, peers observed a certain lack of coordination between different authorities and agencies and stakeholders regarding the design and use of the matura examination.

Strengths:

- Including both internal and external assessment results for upper secondary school graduation and university entrance may reduce pressure on students, teachers and parents.
- A more balanced set of assessment data can provide a more realistic picture of student performance over time.

Policy suggestions:

- **Bring together university and school-system stakeholders to create a shared understanding of standards, expectations for quality, and the implications of new competence-based approaches.** Cooperation and communication between teachers, and examination bodies and other stakeholders (parents, employers) is needed so that everybody is speaking the same language and shares objectives.
- **Establish a balance of internal/external assessments** to relieve high stakes of a single exam and provide a better view of student performance over time. Decisions on the percentage of the final examination and of school-based assessments are needed.
- **Ensure implementation of the minimum entry requirements for universities.** Lithuania notes that although new, stricter requirements for university admission have been introduced, they are not implemented. This is because universities receive funding according to the number of students. However, low standards for admission may result in lower teacher and student motivation.

In **Ireland**, a Transitions Reform Steering Group was established by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011. It is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills. Its membership includes the Ireland Higher Education Authority, which is the central governmental body with statutory authority for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the overall system; and the National Council for the Curriculum and Assessment, which leads developments in school-level curriculum and assessment and supports implementation. Other members are the State Examination Commission (SEC), SOLAS, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

The Group has been working collaboratively to develop and agree proposals to improve the transition experience of young people moving from second-level to higher education and to bring about progressive and incremental enhancements. The central focus of this work has been to agree reforms of the Leaving Certificate assessment and grading and the admissions processes to higher education, in order to mitigate some of the undesirable effects of the so-called 'points system'.

In 2017, the work of the group resulted in the Department of Education and Skills changing the Leaving Certificate grading scale. The new grading scale now has 8 grade bands whereas previously there were 14 grade bands. As a result of the changes to the Leaving Certificate Grading Scale, the Common Points Scale used by higher education institutions (HEIs) to determine entry has been revised to reflect these changes. It remains the position that the six best scores, in recognised subjects, in one Leaving Certificate Examination will be counted for points computation for HE entry. The reforms were designed to help to reduce the pressure on students at exam time and enable them to have a broader and more-rounded learning experience in their Senior Cycle.

In France, there is a 20-point grading scale, with 20 as the top grade, and 10 the average grade needed to earn a diploma. Based on the 2019 reform of the French baccalaureate (upper secondary school graduation), school-based continuous assessments are now 40% of students' final overall grade (10% based on two final years' results in teacher devised tests taken in core subjects, 30% based on two final years' results in school-based tests devised nationally in core subjects).

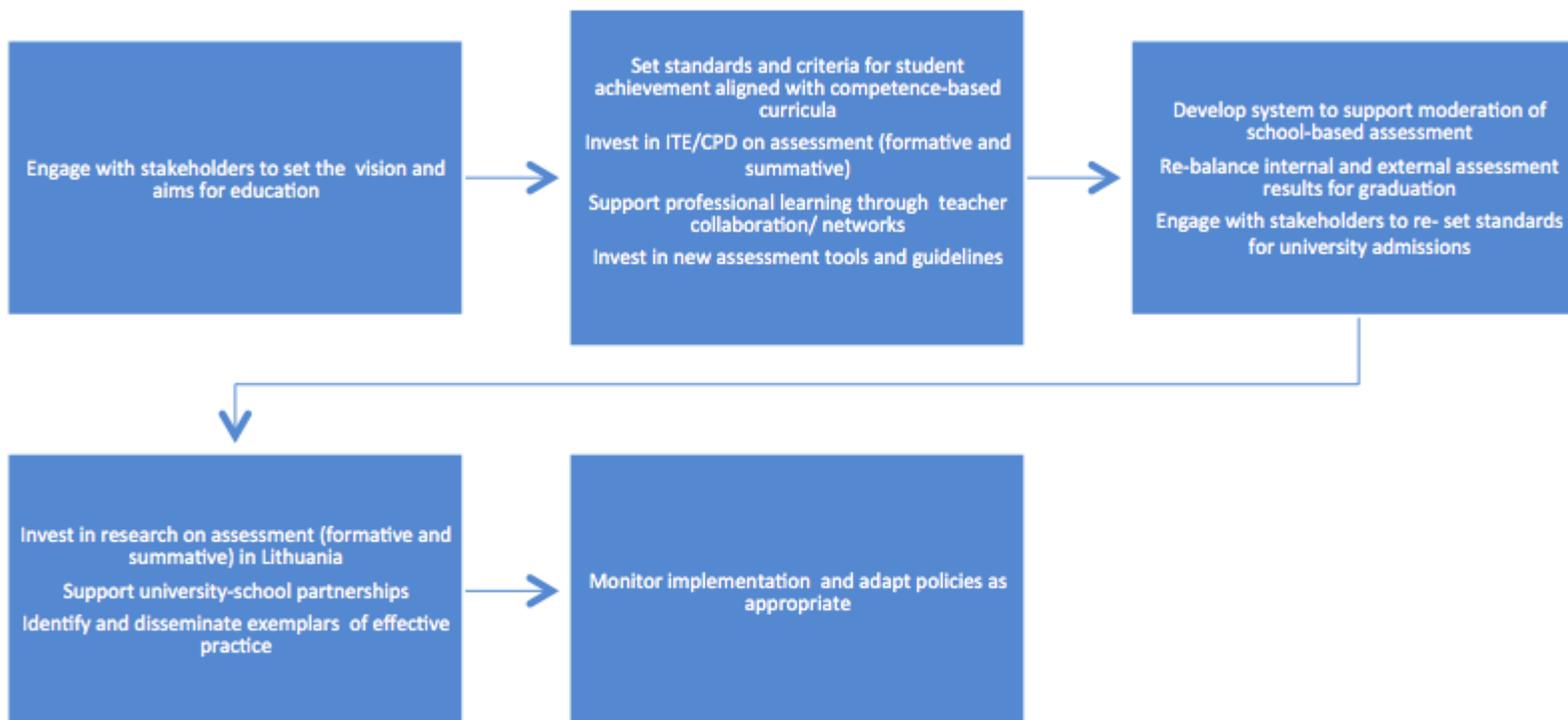
Students take their final national examinations in four subjects (French, philosophy and 2 specialities, or majors, chosen by the student), and a "grand oral" (final oral examination based on one or two majors). The results count for 60% of final total grade.

France has a dual system. On the one hand, vocational colleges and schools of higher education are selective. On the other hand, academically-oriented universities are not selective: an upper secondary-school diploma (baccalaureate) provides near automatic access. Any student can study any subject, with the exception of a few areas like medicine or high-demand subjects (e.g., psychology, sport sciences). However, there is a failure rate of about 40% for first year students. Those that fail in the first year can try again as many times as they wish. About half of those who try again succeed the next time. The high failure rate has led the Ministry of education to provide information and guidance for students during the admissions process for both selective and non-selective higher education institutions.

In Norway, university admission requirements include proof of completion of the three-year upper secondary general education programme or upper secondary vocational education. The student's grade point average is based on their final marks in each subject and in their final examinations; students may earn additional points (e.g. science or foreign language specialisation, or based on gender for those subjects where there is a gender imbalance). Most students do not sit university examinations; they are only required for a few specialised studies (e.g. music, theatre).

University admissions are open. Universities are funded by the state. If there are specific professions or subjects where there is a need for more student places, then more places may be made available. However, for some studies there is limited access, and the points required for admission can be very high.

Figure 2: Long-term planning for educational assessment reforms in Lithuania



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