Excerpt of Exec Summary

Student Assessment in Turkey, OECD, 2019

In many respects, the Turkish education system stands out internationally as a success story. Major investments in the school system in the early 2000s have resulted in a vast expansion of participation. By 2015, participation in primary and secondary school had become universal. Among the upper secondary school population, the country outperforms other middle-income countries, with enrolment rates increasing by 70% since 2005. The universalisation of education is even more remarkable because learning outcomes improved over the same period.

Yet, the education system is also marked by disparities. Students growing up in less developed regions are almost 20% more likely than their peers in the most developed regions to leave school before completing compulsory education. Of those aged 15 and in school, only around half are gaining the essential competencies they need for life and work. Results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2015, found that 40% of 15-year-olds had not developed basic reading and writing skills and 50% had not developed basic mathematics skills (Level 2).

The Turkish education system is driven by an ambitious reform agenda. The government is focused on how quality and equity can be improved so that all students can do well. This review provides recommendations to use student assessment more effectively to support better learning outcomes.

Ensuring national goals provide a coherent vision to guide assessment

The curriculum provides the basis for student assessment. In Turkey, far-reaching curriculum reform over the past decade has focused instruction on competency-development and the individual needs of each student. However, the ambition has not yet been fully translated into practice. Assessment in many classrooms continues to be characterised by questions that privilege memorisation rather than complex competencies like critical thinking and problem solving. One reason is that teachers do not have a complete understanding of the curriculum’s expectations and how this impacts assessment. Developing learning standards that clearly specify what students are expected to know and be able to do will help teachers better visualise more complex outcomes and guide their students towards these through assessment feedback. Developing more effective assessment practices in the classroom To assess the full breadth of Turkey’s curriculum, teachers have to use different types of assessments. Turkey’s teachers are comfortable, competent users of closed and short answer assessments like quizzes and multiple-choice questions. They are less confident in using more performance-based assessments like portfolios, investigations or essays. These types of assessment are important in a competency-based curriculum, however, because they compel students to draw on a wider range of knowledge and skills to construct their own answer. In the short term, Turkey can develop far more assessment tools, like assessment templates, diagnostic assessments and guidance on portfolios to help teachers use more diverse assessment types. This needs to be complemented by building practical, hands-on opportunities to try out new assessment tools and techniques into initial teacher education and continuous professional development.

Positively influencing learning through the national examinations and assessment

The structure of schooling and higher education means that there is significant pressure to gain a place in one of the country’s most prestigious high schools and, later, bachelor’s programmes. The two national examinations in Grades 8 and 12 identify those students who will receive one of these places, meaning that they carry very high stakes. The stakes make transparency and objectivity imperative, meaning that the vast majority of examination items are multiple-choice questions capable of automatic scoring. This leads to teachers and students focusing extensively on preparing for a limited range of learning tasks. Major examination reforms were introduced during the course of this OECD review, with the aim of reducing the stakes and encouraging broader learning. In particular, Turkey has sought to introduce more question items that are set in authentic contexts and assess higher order thinking skills. Creating an examination for certification of upper secondary will also provide meaningful recognition of the completion of compulsory education for students who do not progress to tertiary education, contributing to reducing the stakes of the examination in Grade 12. Finally, using a national assessment to provide more data on learning outcomes during schooling will help to direct the actions of policymakers, schools and teachers to ensure that all students are enabled to reach national expectations. Over time, this will also help to raise the quality of all education options, reducing pressure on the few places in the most prestigious schools.

Using the wider evaluation system to promote better assessment and learning

The wider evaluation system of teacher appraisal, school evaluation and system evaluation sets the standards for evaluating the quality of assessment practices in schools and classrooms. By setting national objectives for learning outcomes, it is also a major influence on where policymakers, schools and teachers focus their efforts. Turkey’s evaluation system recognises the vital role of assessment for learning. However, it focuses the education system on a narrow definition of success – measured by grades. Also, it is not encouraging teachers and schools to engage in the full range of assessment practices that are important for learning. Turkey’s evaluation system is currently undergoing major changes. The new systems for teacher appraisal and school evaluation should be developed with a close eye towards encouraging the assessment behaviours that are important in classrooms and schools, such as understanding what makes a good assessment, being able to use and develop assessments, and investing in professional development opportunities. A critical step will be to revise national goals for learning outcomes. Focusing these on the achievement of national learning standards, based on reliable assessment data, will be a strong force for communicating the transformation of what students learn, and how they learn.