

Curriculum change, innovation and innovative examinations: Shifting expectations

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In the last two decades, curriculum content in Dutch education has been re-arranged into a limited number of new programs or profiles. Students are expected to study more independently and are encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their studies. Although none of these reforms led to structural changes in the educational system, consultations with the majority of Dutch secondary school principals and teachers have initiated an ongoing debate about the current system of national examinations. Cito, the Dutch National Institute for Educational Measurement, in charge of the production of the national examinations for general education since 1967, the National Examination Board, the Department of Education and the National Organization of School Principals are working together on an agenda for the future of examinations. The aim is to design a more flexible national examination system that will safeguard the quality of the current system while giving enough room for development of innovative examination strategies.

On top of these changes, there is a growing influence of social constructivism in secondary school curricula. This trend has resulted in a number of experimental schools and programs. One important characteristic of these experiments, called the 'new learning', is the tendency to organize education in terms of 'mass customization', in a way similar to mechanisms we see in the organization of industrial processes. Standardization and modular structure leading to 'tailor made' products are important characteristics of mass customization in general and recent research show that these characteristics also apply to this latest education reform.

This presentation discusses the dilemmas and perspectives of maintaining the quality standards of a system of national examinations while giving enough room for experimental schools and their curriculum development.