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ATTAINMENT TARGETS IN ACTION

MAPPING THE OPERATION, EFFECTS AND FUTURE USE
OF A FLEMISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY INSTRUMENT

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CONTENTS

List of figures

Figure 1. Attainment Targets in model along two axes	11
Figure 2. The Model of the Attainment Targets in Operation (MATO)	13
Figure 3. The four scenarios situated on the axes of the Model	25

List of tables

Table 1. Definition of the criteria of use in the operation model	19
Table 2. Defining preconditions for the operation model	20
Table 3. Definition of the conditions for the operation model	21

Introduction	3
1. Attainment Targets in the Flemish educational system: a brief historical overview	5
2. Studying the Attainment Targets in their operation and effectiveness today	9
3. The Model of the Attainment Targets in Operation (MATO)	11
3.1. Outlining the Model	11
3.2. An overview of the criteria	14
Scalability of the Attainment Targets	14
Comparability of the Attainment Targets	14
Testability of the Attainment Targets	15
Assessability of the Attainment Targets	15
Operationalisability of the Attainment Targets	16
Achievability of the Attainment Targets	16
Differentiability of the Attainment Targets	17
Manageability of the Attainment Targets	18
Learnability of the Attainment Targets	18
3.3. The working context for the Attainment Targets	19
3.4. A field of tensions around the Attainment Targets	22
4. Scenarios: towards more effectively operating Attainment Targets?	24
4.1. Scenarios: towards more effectively operating Attainment Targets?	24
4.2. Scenario 1: Attainment Targets as an instrument for quality control	27
4.3. Scenario 2: Attainment Targets as an instrument for quality assurance	31
4.4. Scenario 3: Manageable Attainment Targets for teachers	36
4.5. Scenario 4: Attainment Targets from the perspective of the students	40
4.6. Towards effective scenarios	44
5. Conclusion: in the shadow of the Attainment Targets	47
References	52

Introduction

Children and youth are entitled to school education of high quality. In order to both warrant and control that right in all Flemish schools, the Flemish government uses minimal goals, that have been established legally (by Decree): the Attainment Targets.

The Attainment Targets have been introduced in 1991, but have been modified and developed continuously over time. They were not only revised several times, but also extended considerably. Over the years the Attainment Targets have become tools that are being used for an increased number of different purposes by different actors in the educational system. These developments have both complicated the way the Attainment Targets are actually operating, but also blurred their different meanings and effects. Over the past years the need for clarification, disentanglement and overview of their actual operation has grown and become more urgent. As a consequence of these developments, the Minister of Education in 2015 called for a “Scientific Review of the Effectiveness of the Attainment Targets”. The assignment for this 6 month study (Autumn 2015-Spring 2016) was taken up in a collaborative effort of the Research Group Education, Culture and Society and the Centre for Educational Policy, Innovation and Teacher Education at the KU Leuven (University of Leuven), resulting in an extensive report (Simons, Kelchtermans, Leysen, & Vandenbroeck, 2016).

In this booklet we present the most important findings and insights of the study. We start with a clarification of the issue, the problem statement as well as the research questions, as situated in the particular context of the Flemish educational

system. Next we present the main findings in two sections. A first result of the study is a model to map and understand the way Attainment Targets are actually working in the Flemish educational policy and practice at this moment. For that reason we have called this a “*Model of the Attainment Targets in Operation*” (MATO). The inventory and analysis presented in the MATO, however, identify on the one hand a number of tensions in the way the Attainment Targets are operating, and on the other a broad variety of different (often conflicting) expectations towards the Attainment Targets. On the basis of the MATO and the overview of the different tensions and expectations, we have defined a number of *scenarios to capture possible future use* of the Attainment Targets. The scenarios demonstrate that the different goals and various expectations towards the Attainment Targets are not all compatible and that it is an illusion to assume that it will be possible to formulate and impose Attainment Targets that would reconcile and meet the full spectrum of expectations. The scenarios convey the obvious, but strong message that choices will have to be made for future use. They further elucidate several possibilities, limitations and more in particular consequences, entailed by those possible choices.

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1. Attainment Targets in the Flemish educational system: a brief historical overview

Understanding the status and way of operating of the Attainment Targets in Flemish education is impossible without the knowledge of some of the milestones in Belgian and Flemish educational history. Standaert (2011) argues that the Attainment Targets are rooted in the School Pact Law. This Law provided a legal basis for the so-called active and passive freedom of education that has been warranted by the Belgian Constitution since its very first definition in 1830. The active freedom of education encompasses the right for individual actors to offer schooling and to do so with important degrees of freedom in the choice of curriculum content and its enactment in practice (for example the possibility to set up and work according to one's own specific educational project and/or specific methods). Compared to other countries, the governing bodies (school boards) in Flanders have quite a broad liberty (as well as responsibility) in the way they organize their schools educationally, pedagogically and organizationally. The passive freedom concerns parents' (or pupils') freedom to choose a school that matches their normative ideas and expectations about good education. Of course this passive freedom requires that parents have a real option to choose among different schools, existing in one's neighbourhood and that there are no significant financial thresholds hindering one's choice. For that reason an important achievement of the School Pact Law was the strong reduction of the differences in funding mechanisms for different types of schools.

Based on the type of governing body and on the mechanism for funding, three "school networks" can be distinguished: GO! Education (organized by the Flemish Community, and also called 'financed education'); the subsidized public education (organized by cities, towns and provinces, but subsidized by the Flemish government) and the subsidized private education (organized by a natural or legal person, around religious or educational projects, and subsidized by the Flemish government). In exchange for financial support, the School Pact Law demanded that the governing bodies (or their umbrella organisations) would

accept and submit to a legally imposed minimal curriculum and time table. Schools (governing bodies) would still maintain the freedom to decide on the curriculum content as well as on the educational and didactical methods they want to use, but those would have to be based on and grounded in the minimal curriculum and time tables. The concept of Attainment Targets as it is used today was not yet present in the School Pact Law, but through minimal curriculum and time tables, the government imposed particular minimal quality norms that had to be met by the schools, and which would be evaluated formally.

Attempts to control and ensure educational quality were thus already at play in the late '50s, but the Attainment Targets as such only emerged in the Flemish educational system on July 17th, 1991, with the approval of the Decree on Inspectorate, Agency for Curriculum Development and the Agencies for Educational Consultation. The Attainment Targets were conceived of as containing what society expected to be the minimal contents and goals to be obtained by all students and were therefore legally (by Decree) defined and imposed. In other words, the Attainment Targets emerged as an instrument to warrant the minimal quality of education in all schools and for all students. Attainment Targets were defined at the level of school populations: to be achieved by the "majority of the students". They are not standards to be achieved by (and evaluated for) every individual student, but goals for everybody in a particular student population. However, the expression "majority of" already indicated the unlikelihood that the Attainment Targets would actually be achieved by every single student.

The Attainment Targets, as defined and determined in the Decree had to be integrated in the curricula developed by the providers of education. The inspectorate was assigned the task to check the curricula against the Attainment Targets (as a condition for approval of the curricula). Another key task for the inspectorate was to systematically evaluate the educational quality through school audits, based on the Attainment Targets. This combined use of Attainment Targets and curricula in the government's policy on educational quality, reflected the explicit decision not to opt for some kind of national curriculum and central exams. The Attainment Targets express minimal goals, and since the freedom of education still allows providers of education to decide for themselves on curriculum goals

and educational methods, the responsibility for the actually enacted curriculum in the schools continues to lie with those providers. In theory the governing bodies are responsible for the design of the curricula, but in practice they delegate the task of curriculum development to the level of the school network or the umbrella organisations. The freedom of education also includes the autonomy of the so-called “deliberating classroom council” to take up the final responsibility for certification.

As a consequence of the Decree of 1991, other actors – apart from the government and inspectorate – appeared with clear expectations towards the Attainment Targets, using different criteria for their possible meaningfulness and effectiveness. In the 90s of the former century the discussions mainly centred around the question to what degree the Attainment Targets actually and effectively represented the expectations of society, about who eventually was to decide on the wording of the Attainment Targets and on how these Attainment Targets would relate to the curricula. In addition to those issues, there were debates on whether the Attainment Targets were in line with the constitutional rules on the freedom of education. The Steiner Schools (inspired by anthroposophy), for example, successfully used appeals in court – calling in the constitutional freedom of education – to obtain the right to deviate from the Attainment Targets in their practice.

Later several actors have demanded that the Attainment Targets would be testable through the National Assessment Programme that was developed as a periodical sample survey to monitor the implementation and the achievement of the Attainment Targets at the system level. Furthermore those actors demanded that schools would be given instruments to allow them to themselves evaluate their effectiveness in achieving the Attainment Targets (for example through parallel tests). This way the schools themselves could maximize the chance that the Attainment Targets would be achieved by all students and as such avoid that particular groups would systematically be excluded. Over time, also the teachers emerged as explicit users of the Attainment Targets: teachers as professionals were expected to ground their teaching practice on the Attainment Targets. As a consequence the ‘user friendliness’ of the Attainment Targets became an issue

in the debate (for example as in comparison with other instruments, like the curricula, teaching manuals or other educational resources).

With the introduction of the Flemish Qualifications Framework – modelled after the European Qualifications Framework – the issue of the relationship between Attainment Targets and educational qualifications emerged. And finally and more recently, the increasing call for inclusive education and an appropriate educational dealing with the increasing students' diversity, raised the question of what the role of the Attainment Targets could or should be in that matter.

This very brief overview already demonstrates that the Attainment Targets as an instrument for educational quality are embedded in a specific educational context, fundamentally defined by the constitutional freedom of education. Discussions on the freedom of education will always automatically affect the Attainment Targets. Furthermore the overview shows the ongoing emergence to the scene of new "users" of the Attainment Targets and that as a consequence the functions of or at least the different expectations towards the Attainment Targets have continued to develop, expand and diversify. Our study explicitly focused on (and was confined to) the way the Attainment Targets are operating today, and as such doesn't take into account their historical development. But it is important to keep that history in mind, as it helps to understand the width and importance of the issues that are at stake in the discussion on the Attainment Targets.

2. Studying the Attainment Targets in their operation and effectiveness today

The brief historical overview leads to the central question in our study: what are the Attainment Targets doing? How are they actually operating in the Flemish educational landscape today? This question has hardly been addressed by other research. Studies have been done about the perceptions of the Attainment Targets by principals and teachers (Van Petegem et al., 2010), the challenges related to the cross-curricular Attainment Targets (Elchardus et al., 2008), student outcomes in relation to the Attainment Targets (Ameel et al., 2014; Van Nijlen et al., 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b), etc. Furthermore a number of evaluating, situating and descriptive studies have been made about the Attainment Targets (a.o. Steensels, 2013; Van Hessche, 2013; Vermeulen, 2012; Verstegen en Verbeeck, 2011; Verstegen, 1997; Wielemans, 1995). We already mentioned the work by Standaert (2011), presenting a historical overview of the origins, precursors of the Attainment Targets as well as of their development over the past twenty years. Yet, a study looking at the actual operation of the Attainment Targets as a policy instrument, which explicitly acknowledges and takes into account the different users of the Attainment Targets had not been done yet. The specific purpose of our study was to fill that gap: answering the question of the Attainment Targets' effectiveness by analysing who is actually using them and what that use entails?

Both theoretically and methodologically this study builds on our work on policy analysis in general and on the steering impact of policy documents in particular: Flemish and European policy instruments (Simons, 2007; Simons, 2015; Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008), digital policy instruments (Decuypere, Ceulemans & Simons, 2014), (professional) standards (Ceulemans, Struyf & Simons, 2012; Ceulemans, 2015), information and communication tools (Verckens, Simons & Kelchtermans, 2010) and artefacts (März, Kelchtermans, Vermeir & Appeltans, 2015). Based on this line of research, we treat the Attainment Targets as a policy instrument in which different educational policy issues converge, and around which tensions emerge because the different users of the instrument hold different expectations.

More in particular, we see three different educational issues converge in the question on the effectiveness of the Attainment Targets: 1) an issue of effective educational policy; 2) an educational-didactical issue; 3) an issue of democratic politics. Each of the three issues puts forward different groups of actors, with different interests in the operation of the Attainment Targets: the government and schools (organizing bodies and their umbrella organizations, school leadership, educational care teams in schools), teachers and students, and finally society (including the Flemish Parliament as its representative).

Because the study was limited to 6 months, we had to confine ourselves to a literature review and document analysis. An empirical study to document the actual use of the Attainment Targets was therefore not possible. Furthermore we needed to keep the study tightly focused. The issue of the Attainment Targets touches upon a wide range of other educational issues, like for example the functioning of the curricula, the status and operation of manuals and study materials, the impact of the Attainment Targets on the teacher education curriculum, etc. We strictly limited our study to the operation of the Attainment Targets, although the other issues will be mentioned indirectly.

We further want to stress that our study concerns the way the Attainment Targets are operating today and as such does not address the question of how the Attainment Targets (could) have been developed, nor on their actual content. As a consequence we neither discuss the actors who played a key role in the development of or content decisions on the Attainment Targets (like for example the Flemish Parliament, the Flemish Education Council, the Department of Education and Training in the Flemish Government, ...).

Finally, it is important to mention that throughout this text we will use "Attainment Targets" in a generic way. Our research interest concerns the operation and effectiveness of the Attainment Targets in the Flemish educational landscape as a whole. The name refers to the whole of the attainment targets, development goals, both for primary and secondary education. To stress this generic meaning we will continue to write it with capitals.

3. The Model of the Attainment Targets in Operation (MATO)

3.1. Outlining the Model

Attainment Targets are being used by different actors. In order to map those different users we designed an “**operating model**”, an overview of how the Attainment Targets are ‘working’, ‘operating’ for and through the different users. The model starts from the assumption that all the users have their own expectations about what makes Attainment Targets ‘work well’. In other words, they apply different criteria to evaluate whether the Attainment Targets are operating as they would like them to. The fact that different users have different expectations and apply different criteria to evaluate their actual operation, has as a simple but far-reaching consequence that one cannot simply answer the question of the Attainment Targets’ effectiveness based on one criterion. Depending on the user of the Attainment Targets, their effectiveness will be assessed using different criteria.

In order to present the different users in a clearly structured overview, we position them in a simple model along two axes (Figure 1). On the one hand we distinguish the **vertical policy axe**, with at the top the Flemish Government and at the bottom the different organizing bodies (the school boards, organized in the umbrella organisations, who are actually providing schooling to the public).

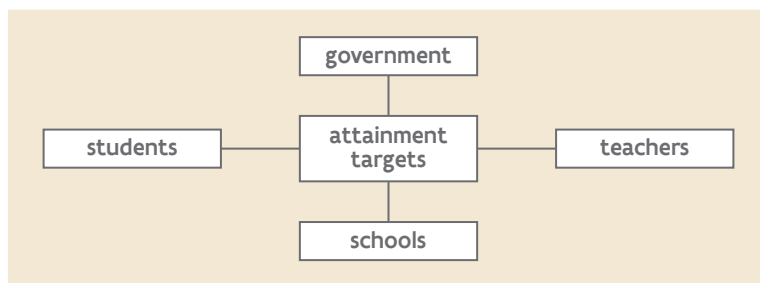


Figure 1. Attainment Targets in model along two axes

Both parties use the Attainment Targets as a basis for their policy. The key aim in that policy for the government is quality control (formal assessment of the quality; ensuring minimal educational quality in all schools). Contrary to them, the organizing bodies are primarily concerned with quality assurance (supporting schools in their efforts to establish, ensure, improve, the quality of their education).

On the other hand we have the **educational-didactical axe**, encompassing the daily actions constituting the practices of schooling. At the one end of the axe we situate the teachers, at the other the students. Teachers design their practice according to the Attainment Targets. Students need to achieve those Attainment Targets before they can obtain a diploma or certificate.

For each of the users, we have made an inventory of how they use the Attainment Targets and what **criterion** they apply to assess whether the Attainment Targets are operating properly for them (see Figure 2). It should be noted that Attainment Targets are always embedded in particular procedures like the school audit in the case of the inspectorate or in particular instruments like curricula or manuals in the case of the teachers. This way we identified nine different criteria, each of which is being applied by different users to assess the Attainment Targets and their effectiveness. In order to capture the criteria in one word, we needed to slightly 'stretch' English vocabulary beyond common use, as will become clear in their labelling (see below).

The Attainment Targets, however, don't operate in a vacuum. There are a number of essential conditions that need to be met in order for the Attainment Targets to operate at all. In our model we refer to them as the essential **preconditions** and **boundary conditions**. Below we briefly elaborate on the conditions and criteria.

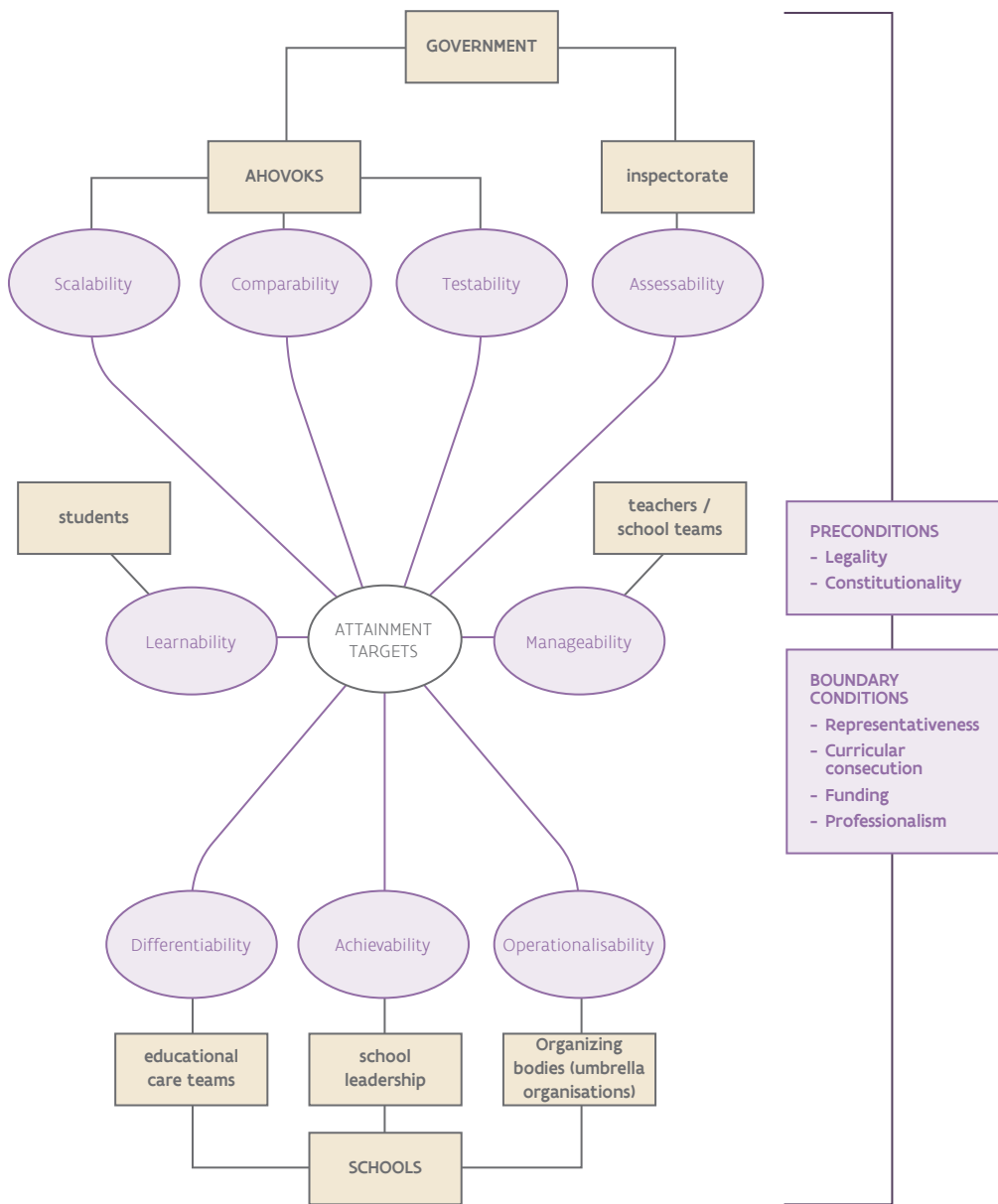


Figure 2. The Model of the Attainment Targets in Operation (MATO)

3.2. An overview of the criteria

Scalability of the Attainment Targets

We start at the top of the policy axe. Within the Ministry of Education (the government end of the axe) the AHOVOKS (Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Educational Qualification and Study Grants) actively uses the Attainment Targets. For this Agency three different criteria matter and are relevant. The first criterion is a rather complex one, since it concerns the ranking of the Attainment Targets on different scales for qualification. That's why we have labelled it "scalability": the extent to which the Attainment Targets allow to describe and define the educational qualifications to be achieved as the outcome of a particular schooling track or educational program. Attainment Targets are essential for the definition of those educational qualifications and as such require that they can be situated on the different scales of the so-called qualification framework (for example the Flemish Qualification Structure).¹ Each educational qualification is assigned a particular level (1 to 8). In other words, the Attainment Targets need to be related in one way or another to the different descriptors of the levels within the Flemish Qualification Structure.

Comparability of the Attainment Targets

Comparability is the second criterion used by AHOVOKS, although it is intrinsically connected to the former criterion of the scalability. The educational qualifications are defined – among other things – in terms of particular Attainment Targets, which for the users have to be transparent and comparable among each other. Attainment Targets and educational qualifications need to be sufficiently transparent to compare certificates, competencies and qualifications obtained elsewhere, study tracks and educational organisations, as well as to evaluate and warrant their equality (equal in educational level and in quality of the education provided). Scaled educational qualifications are the condition to make transparency and comparison at all possible. Because they are so inextricably interwoven

1 For more information: <http://vlaamsekwalficatiestructuur.be/en/>

the criteria of scalability and comparability will always be mentioned together in the rest of the text.

Testability of the Attainment Targets

The third criterion that matters for AHOVOKS is the testability of the Attainment Targets. In order to measure and judge whether (most of) the students actually achieve the Attainment Targets, it is important that they can be tested. In practice this testing is done in the National Assessment Programme, performed by the Policy Research Centre for Test development and Assessments at KU Leuven. Those tests aim at portraying the quality of Flemish education at system level, in order to allow for the quality of the educational system to be assessed, controlled and improved (Vlaamse overheid, 2015b). In order to be testable, Attainment Targets need to permit the design and construction of tests or to be translated into test items in a valid and reliable way.

Assessability of the Attainment Targets

The top end of the policy axe further also includes the educational inspectorate. For them the assessability of the Attainment Targets matters most, meaning first and foremost that these targets need to constitute a feasible framework to base the quality audits of schools on. The difference with testability is important here. The latter refers to the possibility to actually *measure* the minimal (content) quality of education at the level of the Flemish *educational system* as a whole. Assessability, on the contrary and from the perspective of the inspectorate, concerns the possibility to properly *assess* whether minimal educational quality is being achieved at the *level of a particular school*. A second use of the Attainment Targets by the inspectorate encompasses the evaluation of the curricula, submitted by the governing bodies or their umbrella organisations. Based on the Attainment Targets the inspectorate further also advises the Minister of Education on the approval of the curricula, on the condition that they represent the Attainment Targets in a valid way. In other words it has to be possible for the inspectorate to clearly recognize the Attainment Targets in the curricula.

Operationalisability of the Attainment Targets

At the bottom end of the policy axe we situate the providers of schooling: the governing bodies and their umbrella organisations, school leaders, etc. In other words: everyone who uses the Attainment Targets, one way or another as part of local school policy. The governing bodies require that the Attainment Targets would permit to be operationalized or integrated in more detailed and elaborated curricula. Hence, the Attainment Targets need to be useful as the basis for concrete curricula and curriculum aims as defined by the schools. A further consequence is that Attainment Targets also need to be incorporated in procedures and criteria for certification of the students. Of course this also touches on the criterion of assessability: the Attainment Targets need to be integrated or translated in curricula in such a way that the inspectorate can effectively approve them for use by the schools.

Achievability of the Attainment Targets

School leaders use the Attainment Targets to set up their local internal policy on educational quality in the school. This implies that for them the Attainment Targets need to be achievable by the students in the particular context of their school. Apart from the more general curricula, every school uses a School Work Plan, a more specific application and translation of the general curriculum to its daily school practices. A School Work Plan – in addition to the general curricula – explains in more detail how the school operates, what its educational project looks like, what its preferences are in teaching methodology, how it is internally organized, and what procedures and processes it has in place for student evaluation (deliberation, decisions on certification). Some schools will themselves – as part of their local policy on quality – use instruments to evaluate the actual achievement of the Attainment Targets. One example for this is the use of parallel versions of the tests used in the National Assessment Programme, which are made available to schools.

Differentiability of the Attainment Targets

A final criterion that matters at the bottom of the policy axe is differentiability. This criterion reflects the aspiration to maximally adjust the Attainment Targets to the diversity of the student population in a classroom or school. Of course, differentiation is a very broad concept. One can, for example, distinguish several motives for differentiation: differentiation can apply to differences between students in interests, but one can also take into account the differences in how students learn and in what stage of the learning process they find themselves (Struyven, 2015). Furthermore different forms of organizing differentiation can be distinguished: for example differentiation based on teaching methods or ability grouping, but also based on the particular goals or mastery levels one wants to achieve with the students. For the purpose of our analysis we confine the meaning of differentiation to the level of goal achievement: can or should the content or the level of the Attainment Targets be adjusted to particular student characteristics? From the perspective of differentiation the purpose is to maximally adjust the Attainment Targets to the differences between students. More in particular this implies that not all students need to learn all the content, nor obtain the same level of mastery for all Attainment Targets. The use of this criterion on goal differentiation is relatively recent in Flemish education. It is partly connected to the developments towards inclusive education as well as to the growing heterogeneity of the student population. It is important to mention that the demand for differentiated Attainment Targets will give them a new and different status. Attainment Targets are then no longer the minimal goals with one level of mastery to be obtained by all (or most of the) students (in a particular level of schooling, study track etc.). But they would rather get the status of general core or development goals, within which different levels of mastery can and will be distinguished and acknowledged.

Manageability of the Attainment Targets

This brings us to the educational-didactical axe, with on the one hand the teachers. Teachers use the Attainment Targets – or their translation in curricula, manuals and teaching materials – in their daily practice in the classroom. From

the perspective of the teachers the manageability of the Attainment Targets is the most important concern. It implies that Attainment Targets need to fit into both the teachers' subject knowledge and expertise (which justify teachers' educational freedom and responsibility in their practice) as well as their pedagogical expertise. The latter means that teachers can effectively work towards the Attainment Targets, by using different teaching strategies and resources.

Learnability of the Attainment Targets

At the other end of the educational-pedagogical axe, the students are positioned: students need to be able to learn the Attainment Targets. Through their learning outcomes, and based on exams, tests and decisions of the classroom council, it can be judged whether or not the Attainment Targets have been achieved by the students. In this sense, of course, students are not active users of the Attainment Targets, but rather other actors use the Attainment Targets with the purpose of making students learn something. For that reason it is the perspective of the student that matters here. It is the interest of the students in whether or not Attainment Targets can be learned. It is obvious that this learnability is important to all other users as well. But for them the learnability is not the direct criterion to evaluate the actual operation of the Attainment Targets.

Table 1. Definition of the criteria of use in the operation model

CRITERIA	DEFINITION
Scalability	<i>Used by AHOVOKS: Attainment Targets (as part of educational qualifications) can be situated in the structure of educational programmes and can be scaled into the qualifications structure</i>
Comparability	<i>Used by AHOVOKS: transparent Attainment Targets to permit comparison (between schools, programs, certificates...)</i>
Testability	<i>Used by AHOVOKS: Attainment Targets can in a functional way be used to design and implement testing at system level</i>
Assessability	<i>Used by inspectorate: Attainment Targets are a useful basis for assessing the educational quality in schools (i.e. through school audits) as well as the curricula (submitted for approval by the providers of education)</i>
Operationalisability	<i>Used by providers of education (governing bodies; umbrella organisations): Attainment Targets can be translated into particular teaching materials and curriculum instruments (i.e. curricula)</i>
Achievability	<i>Used by school leaders: Attainment Targets can be achieved through practices in school (School Working Plan, parallel tests, deliberation ...)</i>
Differentiability	<i>Used by educational care teams: Attainment Targets permit differentiation in goals (different levels of mastery), based on the diversity in the student population</i>
Manageability	<i>Used by the teachers: Attainment Targets are manageable in daily classroom practices (i.e. through manuals and teaching materials)</i>
Learnability	<i>Used by students: Attainment Targets can effectively be achieved (learned) (i.e. learning outcomes)</i>

3.3. The working context for the Attainment Targets

The MATO maps the different actors (users) of the Attainment Targets as well as their criteria to evaluate how the Attainment Targets are operating. Of course, those actors always working in a particular context. Therefore we want to stress again that it is of no use to treat the Attainment Targets only by themselves, but one needs to understand and take into account how they are part of the particular processes (i.e. school audits, national tests), procedures (i.e. curriculum development) or instruments (i.e. curricula, teaching manuals). Because of this it is very difficult to find out whether particular actors (i.e. teachers or schools) primarily draw on the Attainment Targets or rather use other instruments, based on the Attainment Targets (i.e. teaching manuals or curricula). In one other study it was documented that teachers in practice prefer to use the curricula

and that they were acquainted with the curriculum goals, rather than with the Attainment Targets (Van Petegem et al., 2010).

Further it needs to be clear that our model doesn't take into account the development over time. We do remind the reader that over time more and more different actors have started to actually use the Attainment Targets. As a consequence new criteria for the Attainment Targets have emerged and been added. At the beginning assessability (inspectorate) and operationalisability (curricula) of the Attainment Targets were the most important criteria. Next came for example the need for testable Attainment Targets (tests) or scalable Attainment Targets (qualification framework). In other words, over time, more and more different actors have started to use the Attainment Targets and self-evidently did so from their own perspective and expectations about what makes Attainment Targets effective. Our model does not judge whether particular expectations or criteria are legitimate or not. Nor does it make any judgement about some actors or criteria being more important than others.

In terms of the context, finally, we want to bring to the attention that the operating model not only encompasses criteria for use (and evaluation of effectiveness of Attainment Targets), but also identifies a number of conditions that need to be met for the Attainment Targets to be able to operate in a meaningful way. Before Attainment Targets can operate properly, they need to exist, which means that they have to be developed, formulated, as well as formally established and defined through legislation, without contradicting or violating the constitutional provisions about the freedom of education. For that reason we identified two essential preconditions: legality and constitutionality (see Table 2). Without this political or legal anchoring there simply are no Attainment Targets in action or available to be used by the diverse other actors.

Tabel 2. *Defining preconditions for operation model*

PRECONDITIONS	DEFINITION
Legality	<i>Approval and legal ratification of Attainment Targets as minimal goals, defined by Decree</i>
Constitutionality	<i>Attainment Targets are in line with constitution and other legislation</i>

Next to these essential preconditions, a number of boundary conditions need to be met in order for Attainment Targets to be operating: representativeness, funding, curricular consecution and professionalism (see Table 3). Through the Attainment Targets society expresses what it expects of education in terms of content. The Attainment Targets therefore need to represent those expectations. Furthermore the different Attainment Targets (i.e. for primary versus secondary schools) are sufficiently adjusted and related. In addition both sufficient funding for the schools as well as professional expertise (trained teaching force) need to be at hand to achieve the Attainment Targets. All of these are conditions which need to be fulfilled before the Attainment Targets can actually be used and applied in a meaningful way.

Tabel 3. *Definition of the conditions for the operation model*

BOUNDARY CONDITIONS	DEFINITION
Representativeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – content of Attainment Targets is representative for the expectations from society – Attainment Targets have a broad social basis in society
Funding	<i>The funding mechanisms for schools are sufficient and appropriate for them to meet the Attainment Targets</i>
Curricular consecution	<i>Attainment Targets are internally consistent, permitting students to move and change between and within different levels and programs of education</i>
Professionalism	<i>The expertise of teachers or other educational actors to properly manage and use the Attainment Targets</i>

The Model for Attainment Targets in Operations (MATO) can be used in two ways. The model firstly maps the complexity of the actual operations of the Attainment Targets. It thus demonstrates that the question whether Attainment Targets are operating effectively is not an unequivocal, but rather an ambiguous one. One always needs to ask: effective for whom and in relation to what criteria? Secondly the model is an heuristic framework to systematically look for the possible tensions that exist in the different usage of the Attainment Targets by different actors. Not all actors hold the same expectations towards the Attainment Targets. So it is very likely and obvious that tensions can and will occur. We will elaborate this in more detail below.

3.4. A field of tensions around the Attainment Targets

In the Attainment Targets' operation two types of tensions can be distinguished: internal and external tensions. The internal tensions refer to the situation where the existing Attainment Targets are not or not sufficiently effective for a particular user or actor. These tensions always indicate in one way or another that the existing Attainment Targets for particular users are not operating in an optimal way. External tensions result from the fact that a particular criterion used by one actor is difficult or even not at all reconcilable with the criterion used by another actor.

Our analysis shows that for each of the criteria a number of internal tensions can be distinguished. This implies that the actual Attainment Targets do not meet all the expectations of any of the different users. The inspectorate, for example, was found to struggle with some of the Attainment Targets that are too abstract in their wording and it was observed that more concrete Attainment Targets are necessary if the inspectorate has to apply them in their judgment of educational quality (school audits). Another tension results from the fact that the Attainment Targets are too numerous and too specific, leaving too little space for optimal operationalization by the schools in their curricula. Next, there is a clear tension for the teachers who find the abstract Attainment Targets actually not manageable. Or also the tension that the actual Attainment Targets don't allow for a differentiation in different mastery levels.

Apart from these internal tensions, our analysis also identified a significant number of external tensions because the criteria of different users were found to be irreconcilable among each other. One example to illustrate this: the sufficiently concrete and substantial (meaningful in subject content) Attainment Targets, necessary for use in school audits, are very difficult to reconcile with the demand for unequivocal and measurable learning outcomes that are needed for the construction of tests as part of the National Assessment Programme. Another example is that the minimal Attainment Targets that are wanted by the curriculum developers can't be reconciled with the teachers' demand for sufficiently concrete Attainment Targets.

To sum up: it is obvious that the way the Attainment Targets are actually operating today is the source for numerous and often counterproductive tensions. This does not automatically imply that all users are in conflict. Further it is obvious that some users don't only cherish their own criteria, but will also acknowledge and value the criteria of some of the other users. The essential finding, however, remains that it is very difficult – if at all possible – to have Attainment Targets that operate in an effective way for all possible users (with all their different expectations and criteria to judge their effectiveness). Therefore the key question to answer in relation to the future use and role of the Attainment Targets is: how can we deal with the diversity in expectations? And as a consequence: which criteria have more priority or legitimacy?, which expectations can be shared among different users or are reconcilable?, and which criteria need to be taken into account in a possible reform of the Attainment Targets?

However, at the same time each actor will have to decide how one's own expectations could be related to or reconciled with those of other actors. This issue is especially urgent when it comes to the development of (new) Attainment Targets and therefore matters in particular for the actors responsible for that development (for example Flemish Parliament, Ministry of Education, ...): which criteria and expectations should be taken into account as legitimate, realistic, reconcilable or most urgent? Inevitably this will require that the wide range of expectations towards the Attainment Targets will have to be narrowed down and that choices will need to be made. In the next section we present different possibilities to actually deal with the tensions and make those choices. We do so by sketching scenarios, depicting what would be the consequences of different possible choices.

4. Scenarios: towards more effectively operating Attainment Targets?

In the previous paragraphs we have demonstrated how the Attainment Targets are operating in Flanders, but also explained that their effectiveness is judged by different actors, using different criteria, holding different expectations towards the Attainment Targets. Those expectations and criteria are not always reconcilable and result in particular tensions. For that reason we have chosen to present our recommendations for future policy on the Attainment Targets in the form of scenarios: we show what the outcomes will be if one chooses to give particular criteria or expectations priority over others. As such the scenarios provide a clear base for making particular policy choices. In other words, the scenarios demonstrate what the options are to make Attainment Targets effective. They don't intend to identify and promote a best solution or option. Their goal is to provide policy makers and other stakeholders with the necessary insights into different possibilities and more in particular in the consequences of those possibilities. Furthermore the scenarios allow the different users of the Attainment Targets to understand how their own expectations relate to those of other users. The scenarios show them whether those expectations are close and reconcilable, or rather very distinct and irreconcilable.

4.1. The construction of the scenarios

The key lesson from our analysis is that the Attainment Targets cannot possibly meet all the different expectations that are held towards them at this moment. If one still tries to achieve this, the outcome will be minimal, relatively meaningless 'compromising Attainment Targets'. Instead of trying to meet all expectations, we argue in favour of a different stance: one should not try to adjust the Attainment Targets to all expectations, but rather work the other way around and adapt the expectations to the Attainment Targets. This implies that choices need to be made and that in each scenario one or two criteria are given priority over others. In order to decide which criteria to prioritize, we used the axes, propping the Model of the Attainment Targets in Operation. This resulted in the identification of four scenarios (see Figure 3). The first scenario treats Attainment Targets

first and foremost as an instrument for **quality control**. Next is a scenario that gives central stage to the providers of schooling (organizing bodies and their umbrella organisations), for whom the Attainment Targets play a key role in their **quality assurance**. On the horizontal axis, two further scenarios can be distinguished: a scenario that treats the Attainment Targets as an instrument in the hands of the **teachers**, and one that prioritizes the **perspective of the students**.

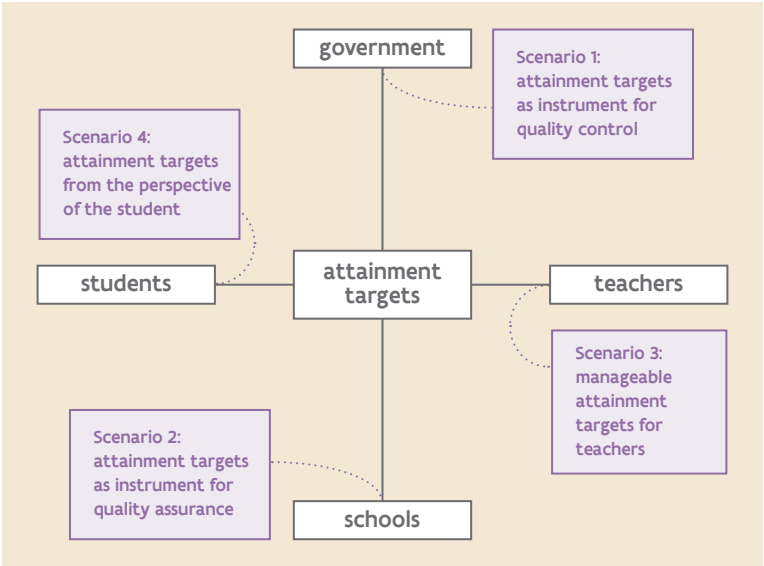


Figure 3. The four scenarios situated on the axes of the Model

Each scenario revolves around one or two criteria from the MATO that are given central stage. Furthermore, each scenario also explicitly addresses the question to what extent its central criteria are compatible with others. This analysis is essential: to what extent can the Attainment Targets which are optimal for one particular user or actor (for example, the inspectorate) be adjusted to or combined with the needs of other users? In answering this question, we identified for each of the scenarios situations in which the expectations and criteria were not or almost not compatible. These are important findings, because they clearly

demonstrate which expectations on the Attainment Targets would need to be adjusted, modified or even given up if one chooses for a particular scenario.

It is evident that throughout the formulation of the scenarios, one shouldn't lose sight of the original goal and ambition of the Attainment Targets, being: **the government's attempt to warrant a minimal educational quality and as such a core curriculum for all students, irrespective of the school they attend.**

This ambition for equality and minimal quality is in a fundamental way interwoven with the status of the Attainment Targets in the Flemish educational context. For that reason we have explicitly evaluated in each of the scenarios whether this ambition can be achieved.

Before providing an overview of the scenarios, we want to remind the reader of three important issues. Firstly, we continue to use the term "Attainment Targets" in each of the scenarios, although the status and form of those Attainment Targets may slightly differ depending on the criteria that are prioritized in the different scenarios. Secondly, one needs to remember that apart from the Attainment Targets also other instruments are being used or play a part in the scenarios, like for example the curricula and the curriculum goals. In the different scenarios the relationship between those elements will differ. Although we explicitly acknowledge this complexity in all the scenarios, it is obvious that the relationship between those different elements continues to need critical attention. Finally we have chosen not to include all possible criteria from the MATO in the scenarios, but to build them around the most central and essential issues.

4.2. Scenario 1: Attainment Targets as an instrument for quality control

This first scenario comes most closely to the original meaning of the Attainment Targets. Its core is the government's concern with the control of educational quality in all schools. The scenario's central aim is to warrant that all students can count on a minimal educational quality, irrespective of the school in Flanders they are attending. This goal can only be achieved on the condition that a system of quality control is established and effectively applied (assessability). For that reason the perspective of the inspectorate is central in this scenario.

Expectations

In a scenario that is primarily concerned with quality control, one can distinguish four different expectations towards the Attainment Targets. First of all, it must be possible to use the Attainment Targets as **assessment criteria** during school audits. Next the Attainment Targets need to be **recognizable** in the curricula that are being submitted for approval by the inspectorate. In other words, in this scenario the Attainment Targets operate as the frame of reference, to be used by the inspectorate in their assessment of schools' quality as well as in their evaluation and advice on the approval of the curricula.² This leads – thirdly – to the need for Attainment Targets to be sufficiently **concrete** in their wording. In order to be useful during school audits, the inspectorate needs Attainment Targets with a low level of abstraction, which can guide them in their search for evidence as the basis for their evaluation. In other words, the Attainment Targets need to 'tell' the inspectors what to look at in a school's way of operating to assess the educational quality it provides. Finally, this scenario requires **substantial** Attainment Targets. 'Substantial' has a double meaning here. On the one hand the Attainment Targets need to be sufficiently ambitious in identifying what

² Governing bodies and their umbrella organisations are free to design and compose their own curricula (see operationalisability). However, before those curricula can actually be implemented and used in practice, they have to obtain approval by the inspectorate. In order to make the evaluation and approval of the curricula possible, they need to explicitly reflect the Attainment Targets. Therefore it has to be possible to recognize the Attainment Targets in their translation and operationalization in the curricula.

level in the mastery of the curriculum content is expected. This is an essential prerequisite for an evaluation of the minimal educational quality of schools' practice and of the curricula. On the other hand the Attainment Targets must cover a sufficiently wide range of content domains as to warrant a broad core curriculum for all students. In other words, substantial Attainment Targets are necessary to guarantee equality between students and schools. The Attainment Targets need to express an 'obligation to achieve' and possibly an 'obligation to aspire' (for particular goals) for the 'vast majority of students'.

The latter brings up a central question for this scenario: do the Attainment Targets need to be achievable for the majority of the students (= level of student population) or do they need to be achieved by every student as such (= individual level)? The answer to that question depends on how the expression "majority of the students" is understood. There are two options. A first possible way of understanding is acknowledging that there will always be particular, specific circumstances and conditions, in consequence of which some students will not achieve the Attainment Targets. The second possibility is assuming that a number of students per definition will not be able to achieve the Attainment Targets (due to intelligence, personal traits, etc.). In the first option one believes that in principle it is possible for all students to achieve the Attainment Targets, but one does take into account that there can be circumstances, beyond one's control, that may impede the outcome. In this option one allows some latitude to schools, but also to students in the achievement of the Attainment Targets. The second option simply takes for granted that not all students are capable of achieving the Attainment Targets. Of course, this latter position, contradicts the very idea of Attainment Targets as an instrument to warrant a core curriculum for all students in all schools. By assuming that some students will not achieve the goals, those students will be structurally excluded by the system. Furthermore that second option may have as a consequence that schools no longer fully commit to endeavour with every means to effectively achieve the Attainment Targets with all their students.

In this scenario one could consider replacing the phrase "for the majority of the students" by the wording "to be achieved by all students". This could be a warrant

that all schools feel under pressure to continue their maximal efforts to obtain the goals. As a consequence, however, the latitude for students and schools may disappear, and that the 'obligation to achieve' will apply for every individual student. Furthermore, it might lead to a downward adjustment of the envisaged level of mastery, in order to meet that 'obligation to achieve'.

Each of both alternatives – 'majority of the students' versus 'individual achievement' – therefore has pros and cons. If in this scenario one chooses for Attainment Targets to be achieved by every student, there are still a number of further issues that need to be clarified: what will happen to students who fail?; what latitude will schools and teachers have?; how can schools and teachers deal in a responsible way with circumstances that are beyond their control?

Problematic compatibility

If one wants to use Attainment Targets primarily as an instrument for quality control, it will be very difficult or impossible to also meet two other expectations.

Firstly it is very difficult to have substantial and concrete Attainment Targets, which at the same time allow for a differentiation in levels of mastery by the students (differentiability/learnability). If one actually applies different standards or norms, it becomes impossible for the inspectorate to judge whether a school achieves the minimal educational quality for all students, and as such to warrant the equality of schools. The existence of different levels of mastery would only be possible when the government would relinquish her strive for minimal educational quality for all. This is of course highly problematic because it would actually undermine and even contradict the very idea of the original goal and meaning of the Attainment Targets.

Secondly, concrete Attainment Targets that are effective and necessary for use in school audits, are not reconcilable with the teachers' expectations to use Attainment Targets to actually design and enact their practice (manageability). One could of course question whether at all the Attainment Targets *have to be*

manageable by the teachers, arguing that for them the curricula and other instruments are much easier and more effective to use in their practice. Whether or not the latter argument holds true is an important and complex question, yet it was not part of our study. But if one would strive for Attainment Targets that would as such and in practice be manageable or usable for teachers, then the challenge would be: how could the concrete and substantial Attainment Targets, needed by the inspectorate for quality control, fit the maximal educational ambitions of the teachers in their practice? An instrument that is meant to control and warrant quality at the level of the schools doesn't seem reconcilable in any realistic way with an educational-didactical instrument that supports teachers in their work at the level of the classroom.

Conclusion

In order for Attainment Targets to operate as an instrument for quality control, they need to be assessable. This requires a phrasing that is sufficiently concrete (to guide the evaluation practices of the inspectorate) and sufficiently substantial (to warrant minimal quality, a sufficiently broad range of content as well as equality for all schools). On the condition of the necessary clarification and mutual adjustment, this type of Attainment Targets can be reconciled with the (national) tests and the strive for quality assurance by the providers of education.

However, substantial and concrete Attainment Targets are not reconcilable with Attainment Targets that meet the expectations of teachers and students. Warranting equality and quality for all is not compatible with the expectation to have different levels of mastery in the Attainment Targets, allowing students to achieve a particular Attainment Target at different levels. Furthermore, teachers will find little or no support for their particular educational and didactical ambitions in Attainment Targets that are meant for quality control. Theoretically one could imagine a reconciliation of those expectations, but only at the expense of meeting strict conditions: one would have to let go of the aim for quality assurance and the core curriculum for all students, as well as radically revise or even abandon the idea of educational freedom (for the teachers). In the latter case this scenario would undermine itself.

The fact that Attainment Targets suitable for quality control are not at the same time appropriate for teachers nor students, does not imply that teachers or students wouldn't matter. It simply demonstrates that teachers and students should not be willing to be the prime users of that kind of Attainment Targets.

4.3. Scenario 2: Attainment Targets as an instrument for quality assurance

In the second scenario we look at the Attainment Targets from the perspective of the education providers: the schools who ensure educational quality. This is different from the government's concern with controlling and warranting educational quality. The actors with a central position in this perspective are the developers of curricula (and the umbrella organisations of the organizing bodies), as well as the school leaders, with their need for operationable and achievable Attainment Targets. It is their responsibility to achieve the Attainment Targets in their schools through the curricula and the School Work Plans. In other words, in this scenario the curricula constitute the ultimate frame of reference. One needs to note immediately that this scenario implies a shift in the operation of the Attainment Targets. In their actual operation today the Attainment Targets constitute the frame of reference and not the curricula. Or put differently: in the actual working of the Attainment Targets quality control is the starting point, and not the concern with quality assurance or the curricula.

Expectations

The crucial question in this scenario of quality assurance is: if the curricula become the core, what would then be the status and form of the Attainment Targets needed? Providers of education who want to operationalize and integrate the Attainment Targets in their curricula, first of all require Attainment Targets that are **minimalistic** in their phrasing and that leave enough space for curriculum goals. In line with this, secondly, the Attainment Targets also need to be sufficiently **open for further interpretation and translation**. This im-

plies then that the Attainment Targets can be **used to define or design educational practice** and allow **translation into teaching methodology (didactics)**.

Curriculum developers, for example, want a set of minimal Attainment Targets that leaves them space and latitude to design the curricula, primarily as reflections and operationalisations of their own educational project, in which then the Attainment Targets can be integrated.

On the part of the schools (who are expected to achieve the Attainment Targets through the curricula) three further expectations can be distinguished. They expect Attainment Targets to be a set of achievable goals, phrased at population level (instead of at individual level). For them the Attainment Targets need to be **achievable** for the **majority of the students**. In order to guide the schools' practices as purposefully and functionally as possible, the Attainment Targets need to be **sufficiently specific** in their phrasing. If Attainment Targets are formulated in too general terms, they don't provide the direction or support schools need in order to engage with them (as integrated in the curricula).

Problematic compatibility

If one emphasizes the role of Attainment Targets for quality assurance, two problematic adjustments with other expectations emerge.

Firstly, the expectations from governing bodies and/or curriculum developers are not compatible with the desire to differentiate in levels of mastery for the Attainment Targets. If particular groups of students are allowed to achieve the same Attainment Targets at different levels (differentiability), the status of the Attainment Targets (and of the curricula built on them) would be undermined. Introducing different levels of mastery in the Attainment Targets and curriculum goals, would imply that curriculum developers and governing bodies are restricted in the ways they can integrate the Attainment Targets in their curricula (in line with their own educational project). Of course, an element in that project might be that schools in their practice try to meet different

needs of their students and therefore value and distinguish different mastery levels in their curriculum goals. However, that raises the question of how the ambition to warrant minimal educational quality for all students and schools could be achieved, since the standard is not the same for all students. It is clear that this is only problematic with regard to differentiation in goals and doesn't apply for other forms of differentiation (for example in didactical methods and strategies).

Secondly, this scenario is not compatible with the inspectorate's task. It would raise the question on what basis the inspectorate could ground its evaluations? Attainment Targets that may serve as a basis for those evaluations need to be concrete and substantial. Yet these are not the kind of Attainment Targets wanted by the schools in their concern for quality assurance. What possible other instrument could the inspectorate use to do its jobs of quality control? In theory, one could imagine two possible answers. A first alternative would be to use the curricula not only as a warrant for quality assurance, but also as a basic instrument for quality control by the government. Yet, several issues arise if this logic of quality assurance on the one hand and that of quality control on the other converge in one and the same instrument. Curricula would then become an instrument in the hands of both the government and the providers of education. Furthermore the issue of how the inspectorate could warrant sufficient equality across the different curricula would emerge, since the criteria for the approval of curricula, as well as for school audits would be very unclear. Finally in this scenario the actual operation of the Attainment Targets would be taken over by the curricula, which then leads to the question of whether Attainment Targets would still be necessary at all. This would then raise the even more fundamental question: how can society and its representatives in the Flemish Parliament possibly express and impose their minimal expectations towards education?

A second alternative would be to phrase the Attainment Targets in a way that would permit at the same time evaluating the curricula and perform school audits (= the quality control agenda of the inspectorate). Yet, although in theory this is imaginable, in practice it remains an open question what such

Attainment Targets would need to look like in order to be fit for that purpose. Since in this scenario the curricula constitute the point of reference, those Attainment Targets could only be minimal testing criteria. If they would be substantial, they would impede the schools' actions for quality assurance, in line with their curricula. And therefore the pressing question remains whether such minimal testing criteria would suffice for a solid system of quality control. Lastly, also in this alternative, it remains questionable whether such criteria would be effective enough to channel society's expectations towards education.

To sum up, we can formulate the essence of quality control and quality assurance as follows. Either curricula one way or another need to be turned into instruments that also allow quality control, but then the very need for Attainment Targets is put to question. Or in this scenario one needs to reconceptualise Attainment Targets such as to make them appropriate to evaluate the quality of curricula, but it remains an unanswered question what those Attainment Targets would have to look like.

Conclusion

A scenario that gives central stage to the perspective of schools (governing bodies or school leaders) puts forward quality assurance as its core concern (and not quality control as in scenario 1). In such a scenario the emphasis is on the curricula and other instruments for quality assurance.

Unless the providers of education would allow for Attainment Targets that are sufficiently concrete and substantial, it is not possible in this scenario to appropriately execute the agenda of quality control. Theoretically quality control could of course exclusively focus on the curricula, but that would put high pressure on the latitude and freedom in the achievement of quality assurance. Unanswered remains the question which criteria could then be used for the approval of the curricula. In the alternative of conceiving of the Attainment Targets as the minimal testing criteria for curricula approval and school audit,

it remains an open question how this could warrant equality in quality across schools.

In any case, this scenario would require a redefinition of the status of both the Attainment Targets and the curricula, with consequences for its legal embedding. By giving the central role in this scenario to the providers of education, the question of the legitimacy and justification for the Attainment Targets will be asked loudly: how can in this scenario society express and demand its minimal expectations towards education? In other words, inverting the starting point – priority given to quality assurance instead of quality control – has fundamental consequences for the actual operation model of the Attainment Targets and for the relationship between education (policy) and society.

This scenario is further also problematic if one wants to meet the expectations from the educational-didactical axe. Attainment Targets that are at the same time instruments for quality assurance and quality control are irreconcilable with opportunities for goal differentiation (different mastery levels) to meet differences between students.

4.4. Scenario 3: Manageable Attainment Targets for teachers

The third scenario starts from the teachers (one end of the educational-didactical axe) and therefore aims at Attainment Targets that are optimally manageable by teachers in the design and enactment of their teaching practices. This scenario also deviates from the Attainment Targets as we know them now. The actual Attainment Targets are not explicitly meant to be directly used by teachers. In practice teachers are now primarily drawing on the curricula and – in line with them– manuals and teaching materials in the enactment of their teaching.

Expectations

In our discussion of the teachers' perspective, we take their educational and didactical expertise for granted and, as such, will not differentiate among teachers. The perspective of the teachers leads to specific expectations about effective Attainment Targets.

Teachers ask for Attainment Targets that allow for translation in different teaching materials and instruments to design their practice: they have to be **“didactically manageable”**. This automatically includes Attainment Targets that are **concrete** enough. If Attainment Targets remain too abstract in their wording, they may well provide direction or communicate expectations towards the teachers, but won't provide support for their enactment in teaching practices. Furthermore the Attainment Targets in this scenario would have to be **sufficiently general**. Too specific Attainment Targets might operate as prescriptions, leaving little or no space for the teachers to translate them themselves into practices based on their own professional expertise and commitment. Teachers want Attainment Targets which they can specify, translate and enact based on the educational project of the school or on their personal competencies, taking into account the particularities of their school context. In other words they need Attainment Targets that are **educationally useful**. Teachers require Attainment Targets which acknowledge their educational, di-

dactical and content expertise, and not Attainment Targets which strive to compensate for possible lack of their professional expertise.

Problematic compatibilities

In a scenario in which Attainment Targets are primarily supposed to be useful and 'user-friendly' for teachers, three problematic compatibilities in expectations can be identified.

Firstly, manageable Attainment Targets can hardly be reconciled with the expectations of curriculum developers and schools (operationalisability). Reconciliation would only be possible if the curriculum developers would themselves focus primarily on the expectations of the teachers for educationally and didactically useful Attainment Targets. This implies, however, that curriculum developers cannot at the same time demand minimal Attainment Targets (in order for themselves to have enough latitude in designing the curriculum) as well as concrete Attainment Targets, which meet the expectations of the teachers. Actually, in this scenario one wonders whether curricula are still necessary or valuable at all. Since in this scenario the Attainment Targets would be immediately useful in practice, they might make the curricula superfluous. Or to put it even more strongly: the co-existence of both manageable Attainment Targets and curricula, would make it very difficult for teachers to know what is expected of them. As a consequence, the relationship between schools and teachers would radically change in this scenario. The latitude for schools to work from an educational project will be reduced in favour of increased freedom for the teachers in their practice.

Secondly it is very difficult to reconcile general Attainment Targets, leaving latitude for teachers' educational freedom, with Attainment Targets that are fit for the (national) tests (testability). Testable Attainment Targets have to be unequivocal in their wording, allowing little or no variation in content and level. This implies that teachers' freedom in translating and enacting the Attainment Targets conflicts with the ambition to measure in a valid way the achievement of the Attainment Targets. Unless the purpose and focus of the tests is revisit-

ed and fundamentally revised, this reconciliation is not possible. Furthermore a fundamental tension may arise between the ambition of the tests to make evaluative claims at system level on the one hand and the responsibility given to teachers in this scenario for the achievement of the Attainment Targets on the other. A consequence might be that both the quality control (through tests, but also through audits by the inspectorate) and the quality assurance (by the school) will focus on the acts and achievements of individual teachers. Although this doesn't have to be problematic per se, it does illustrate the fundamental shift that will automatically occur in this scenario.

Manageable Attainment Targets for teachers are, thirdly, not compatible with differentiated Attainment Targets. If one starts from the assumption that not all students need to achieve all Attainment Targets at the same level, those Attainment Targets become problematic for teachers who want to use them as the guideline to warrant the minimal educational quality that is expected for all students. This is the same tension which – be it in different ways – also emerged in both former scenarios. An additional difficulty in this third scenario is, however, that teachers get mixed messages regarding the educational-didactical efforts they are expected to make. On the one hand this scenario requires teachers to make the didactical efforts (through teaching methods, providing extra time or applying other educational instruments) so as to warrant the optimal conditions that would allow all students to achieve the Attainment Targets. Yet, on the other hand the teachers are given the message from the start that achievement of all Attainment Targets by all students is not possible, nor realistic and that therefore it is allowed to adapt the goals in the Attainment Targets. This is a fundamental tension, resulting from two different starting points. One position reflects an educational-didactical belief that all students can achieve the goals and that therefore all possible means need to be used and implemented in order to obtain this result. The other position stresses the fact that the intrinsic and fundamental differences that exist between students have as a consequence that not all students can achieve the Attainment Targets and that, for that reason, different levels of mastery have to be distinguished and applied from the start.

Conclusion

In this scenario the Attainment Targets are primarily attuned to the teachers' expectations. It is obvious that this differs dramatically from the way the Attainment Targets are operating in today's practices in schools. In this scenario Attainment Targets would be didactically manageable and educationally useful. A consequence would of course be that quality control by the government, as well as quality assurance by the schools would need to be thoroughly re-conceptualised. For example the relationship between evaluating the quality of the school and the evaluation of individual teachers would need radical revision. This scenario makes the teacher – and not the school – the first responsible for educational quality.

Attainment Targets that are easily manageable by teachers, are very difficult to use by a number of other actors. For example, Attainment Targets that are directly useful in practice actually make the curricula redundant and thoroughly reposition schools and governing bodies. Furthermore it is far from evident to use this type of Attainment Targets for the purpose of national tests, since there is a real risk that a system of quality assurance or quality control will emerge in which the individual teacher will be held accountable for the achievement of the Attainment Targets. And this would speak against or even contradict the recognition of teachers' expertise. Finally it is practically impossible to construct Attainment Targets which are manageable for the teachers and at the same time meet the differences between students in their capacities to achieve the Attainment Targets. Including different levels of mastery in the Attainment Targets would then put the teachers in a difficult position: should they start from the belief that all students can achieve all Attainment Targets or should they start from the acknowledgement of the differences in students' capacities, which make it impossible that all students will achieve all Attainment Targets at the same level?

4.5. Scenario 4: Attainment Targets from the perspective of the students

This final scenario starts from the other end of the educational-didactical axe: the students. From the perspective of the students the Attainment Targets primarily need to warrant that the learning goals will always be achieved and by all pupils (learnability). Taking this starting point also would eventually require radical changes in the way the Attainment Targets are actually operating today. The idea that the Attainment Targets would need to be achieved by all pupils differs from the actual statement that this needs to apply for the “majority of the students”. Furthermore this scenario includes the expectation that Attainment Targets would allow goal differentiation (differentiability), because in discussions the demand for a guaranteed achievement for every student is often automatically linked to the need for different mastery levels in the Attainment Targets, in order to do justice to the differences among the students (both in needs and capacities).

Combining both criteria – learnability and differentiability– is further justified because they both focus on the perspective of the students. So, the core of the scenario is the achievement of all Attainment Targets by all students, yet on the condition that the level of achievement and mastery may differ for different (groups of) students.

Expectations

Five different expectations are reflected in the call for Attainment Targets that can be obtained by every single student. Firstly the Attainment Targets need to make explicit the expected learning outcomes and as such have to be **outcome-related** in their wording. Next the Attainment Targets have to be **individually achievable by every student**. For that reason it is important – and that is a third expectation– that one can **examine** (determine) their achievement. This means that an exam or another form of evaluation allows to make a valid claim on whether or not the learning outcome has been obtained. Fourth, those Attainment Targets need to be sufficiently **general** in

their wording, as to allow for the use of different **mastery levels**. Every student will be capable of achieving the Attainment Targets on an appropriate level. This finally implies that in this scenario the Attainment Targets actually have the status of (development) goals: their achievement can be determined at different levels (depending on what is considered an appropriate level of development of the students).

Problematic compatibilities

Attainment Targets which – on the condition of allowing for a differentiation in mastery level– can always be obtained by all students, are very difficult to reconcile with three expectations from other users.

First of all the Attainment Targets in this scenario would be difficult to combine with the substantial Attainment Targets the inspectorate needs to evaluate educational quality across all schools and all students (assessability). In this scenario, however, there no longer is one point of reference, one standard for all students. This makes both the school audits and the approval of curricula problematic to achieve. The question is what calibrations the inspectorate can use for all schools and all students to control and warrant educational quality? One solution could in principle be to give the curricula this role (see also scenario 2 on quality assurance). But that implies that the inspectorate needs Attainment Targets to approve of the curricula. Because of the built-in differentiation in levels of mastery in these Attainment Targets, however, a general standard for minimal educational quality is no longer available. The same applies to the criteria to be used by the inspectorate during their school audits. In this scenario the inspectorate would probably be able to judge the quality of the curricula and the system of quality assurance in use by the school. But it will be very difficult to organize forms of quality control and assessment that would allow to judge whether in all schools and for all students the minimal quality is warranted.

A second problematic compatibility relates to the expectation to control quality by using national tests (testability). This scenario with its emphasis on the

perspective of the students, is primarily concerned with the achievements of individual students. For the tests this poses the challenge on which level to measure when the level of mastery is structurally variable. Of course one could argue in favour of a system of variable tests. Yet, the question then remains how this could possibly be organized and what could be the possible informative value of those measurements for a government striving to control the educational quality over all schools and pupils.

Finally in this scenario the compatibility between its different levels of mastery in the Attainment Targets and the concern with quality assurance at school level (achievability) is highly problematic. If the leadership of a school would be willing to evaluate the achievement of the Attainment Targets (for example through parallel tests) and to establish a coherent system of certification, it will find itself in trouble with this scenario. It would have to set up a proper monitoring system to obtain and maintain an overview of all pupils' learning progress. One wonders whether and how schools would be capable of effectively achieving this. But still another question is how school can at all evaluate their ambitions in achieving the Attainment Targets? What standards should they use? Who is to decide on the issues of how many and which students should obtain particular levels of mastery? And finally also the certification will constitute a huge challenge. Certification in this scenario will either happen in different gradations (depending on the level of mastery that is obtained), or the certificates and diplomas will be the same for all students, but then with a different relative 'weight'. As a consequence it will be very difficult to adjust the level of education, the level of certification and the schools. Certificates or diplomas will represent very different things depending on the level of the outcomes that have been achieved.

Conclusion

This final scenario starts from the perspective of the students. It requires teachers to let go of their striving for a common standard or achievement level for all students and take into account the different capacities of the stu-

dents. Self-evidently this also has consequences for the curricula, which find themselves forced to adopt the different mastery levels as well.

Attainment Targets which primarily focus on the expectations of the students are not compatible with all the expectations related to quality control and to some extent also with those of quality assurance. If one can't any longer use one and the same standard, it becomes almost impossible to evaluate whether a minimal quality level is warranted in all schools. It is also very hard to imagine how the inspectorate could possibly approve of the curricula without a clear standard. Finally, a system of Attainment Targets with a differentiation in mastery levels cannot be combined with national tests, that use one level of achievement for their measurement. All of this is highly problematic, unless one fundamentally reconceptualises the idea of quality assurance and lets go of the ambition to warrant minimal quality for all students and in all schools.

This scenario actually combines two criteria: Attainment Targets that are both learnable and differentiable. One could, of course, narrow down the scenario and leave out the demand for Attainment Targets with different mastery levels. That would imply that the Attainment Targets in this scenario would refer to learning outcomes that are to be achieved by all students at the same level. Those in favour of this system will argue that this is possible, on the condition that sufficient and appropriate educational interventions are done (for example, within-class differentiation and remedial teaching). Those objecting this will ask what the consequences would be for the students or schools who, because of particular circumstances, have not achieved the learning outcomes. Another argument against this scenario is that it will automatically lead to a lowering of the standards in order to be sure that all students can indeed pass. This alternative might meet the needs of the "weakest" students, but – as the argument will go – it doesn't meet the needs of the "strongest" students.

4.6. Towards effective scenarios

Our analysis has demonstrated that today a broad variety of different expectations exists towards the actual working of the Attainment Targets. Those expectations differ and to some extent contradict each other. As a consequence a number of possible tensions emerges around the Attainment Targets and the way they are operating. Trying to meet all the different expectations and phrase Attainment Targets such that they are easy and effective to use by all possible actors, is simply impossible. Attainment Targets cannot possibly please everybody! For that reason we have developed scenarios, starting from the expectations and concerns of different possible users. In each of the scenarios some other users can be included, but others will have to reduce or redefine their expectations towards the Attainment Targets.

The first scenario treats Attainment Targets primarily as an instrument for quality control. This scenario in fact reflects the purpose and ambitions of the Attainment Targets as we know them today: warranting minimal educational quality for all students across all schools. This as a feasible scenario. An important condition, however, is that the expectations from the educational-didactical axe – from teachers and students – are modified. Teachers shouldn't expect in this scenario that the Attainment Targets will be directly useful to guide their practice. Another condition for this scenario to be effective, is to find an optimal balance between the concern with quality control and that with quality assurance. This implies that the relationship between Attainment Targets on the one hand and curriculum (goals) on the other would be clarified and defined, as to make insightful what it is the inspectorate focuses upon: what is the frame of reference and what are the criteria used by the inspectorate? Finally it is important to elucidate in this scenario what would be the role of the Attainment Targets in school internal quality assurance: which criteria do schools use in their procedures for certification? And how do the Attainment Targets relate to the curriculum goals?

In a way the opposite of this first scenario is the second one that focuses on quality assurance, and as such puts the perspective of the providers of edu-

cation at its core. The big challenge in this scenario is how to organize the quality control by the government (inspectorate): what criteria are available to warrant minimal educational quality across schools and for all students? Underneath is the fundamental question whether minimal Attainment Targets, operating as testing criteria, could make those ambitions come true. Another alternative in this scenario is that the Attainment Targets as such would disappear and that one would only use the curricula or other instruments the providers of education develop for that purpose. But even then the question remains on the basis of what criteria the government could possibly evaluate the curricula and what freedom would be left for providers of education to use in the development of curricula. This scenario, focusing on quality assurance, demands a relatively fundamental redesigning of the actual working model: a new kind of Attainment Targets (testing criteria), curricula that can also be used as an instrument for quality control, new role definitions for the inspectorate and a new procedure to make an inventory of society's expectations towards education. The most critical question in this scenario is probably what a system of quality control should look like that aims at safeguarding or warranting society's expectation for a minimal educational quality for all students and all schools? In other words: what instruments can the government develop from the perspective of quality control that would evaluate and safeguard minimal quality in schools and minimal uniformity across schools, as well as warrant that the curricula reflect the minimal demands from society about the content of the core curriculum for all.

Both scenarios that start from the educational-didactical axe struggle with the challenge to include the agendas of both quality control and quality assurance. Assuming that the Attainment Targets are primarily at the service of the teachers, raises the question whether curricula are still necessary at all. And this sets a huge challenge to actually organize and establish quality assurance at school level. Furthermore, Attainment Targets that are primarily oriented towards the students and therefore allow for different levels of mastery make it almost impossible to organize a system that can warrant minimal educational quality across schools and in the name of all students. The key problem is of course that one no longer applies one and the same standard to measure the

achievement of all students. All these tensions are somewhat obvious because the Attainment Targets are primarily an instrument for policy. For that reason it is probably not recommendable to also conceive of Attainment Targets as having to be directly useful to design and enact educational and didactical practices. On the contrary: it might even be confusing. One can't expect teachers to apply an instrument for quality assurance and quality control that doesn't meet their needs. For that reason the status of the Attainment Targets for teachers and students always has to be very clear. And above all: the Attainment Targets and the systems for quality assurance and control linked to them, need to facilitate, rather than hinder optimal educational-didactical processes.

5. Conclusion: in the shadow of the Attainment Targets

Our analysis of the way the Attainment Targets are operating in the Flemish educational system has clearly demonstrated that not only many different actors have expectations about the Attainment Targets, but that those expectations are often contradictory. Attainment Targets can't be the multifunctional panacea. If one strives for a wording of the Attainment Targets that would meet all the different expectations of the users, they will completely lose their effectiveness, because in that case the Attainment Targets will have to be very minimal in every possible sense of the word. In other words, if one wants Attainment Targets that can effectively play a meaningful part, one will have to prioritize. It is totally unrealistic trying to phrase Attainment Targets that can be at the same time an appropriate, effective policy instrument (quality control and quality assurance), and directly contribute in a positive way to the concrete educational-didactical practice.

The question then arises whether quality control or rather quality assurance should be given priority, when rethinking and revising the Attainment Targets? Without any doubt both agendas and purposes are legitimate and important. The scenario around quality assurance, however, showed that this would imply a fundamental rethinking of the system of quality control. If the concern with quality control continues to imply that the government warrants a minimal educational quality for all students, irrespective of the school they are attending, and that students and parents can count on this, the scenario around quality assurance requires the development of new instruments. Central exams could be those instruments. Yet, the research literature has amply and convincingly documented how pervasive and far reaching the negative consequences of such quality control system can be. One of the consequences is that central exams immediately occupy and colonize the educational-didactical axe, and more in particular the teachers and students. What central exams claim to win in terms of quality control, they immediately lose because of their pervasive impact on thinking and acting of both teachers and students. So it remains unclear what the other realistic options could be to reconcile quality control

and quality assurance in the conceptualization and implementation of Attainment Targets.

To conclude, we want to briefly address two issues which emerge in each of the scenarios and for that reason run the risk of being overlooked and forgotten: the issue of differentiation (different levels of mastery), and the issue of the meaning of 'minimal' in the very conceptualization of the Attainment Targets.

It is striking to observe that the expectation of the Attainment Targets to include different levels of mastery causes important problems in each of the four scenarios. This can be explained as follows. Differentiation in levels of mastery starts from the assumption that students in fact differ in terms of their capacities or other characteristics which eventually lead to a difference in the capacity to learn. In other words, the assumption one starts from is that not all students can achieve the same level. However, the basic assumption of the concept of Attainment Targets is a different, even opposite one. It assumes that particular goals or outcomes in education need to be defined and determined on beforehand, being the expression of what society (minimally) expects from the educational system to achieve with all students. The essence of this conception of the Attainment Targets is that all students in principle must achieve a particular level of mastery for those minimal goals or outcomes. These stances represent not just two different assumptions or starting points for thinking, but actually reflect two fundamentally different logics: a logic that emphasizes *development* and a logic that makes *learning* its central concept. What makes the discussion as well as their reconciliation very difficult is the fact that both logics seek legitimacy or justification by claiming to operate in the interest of the students.

The logic of the differentiation in level and goal states that the development of the individual student is its central concern, that this development is purposefully directed towards what society expects of education, but that the level of the obtained learning outcomes is – although relevant – eventually only of secondary importance. It is of secondary importance, because one always needs

to take into account the different possibilities for growth and development of each student. Contrary to this the logic of the Attainment Targets states that particular outcomes for all students are important, because those outcomes represent a particular core curriculum which is essential for each student, and that all students can learn and achieve the outcomes, if only one applies the right educational-didactical interventions, or provides the necessary conditions, support and instruments.

The fact that both logics are difficult to reconcile, becomes evident in the kind of arguments that are being used by each of them to criticize the other. The logic of 'learning' is often criticized for not taking into account the differences in learning capacity between students, for ignoring that personal development and growth are subordinate to learning and outcomes, that society can or should not expect the same of every student and that – because of unrealistic expectations about the mastery level that needs to be obtained – particular (groups of) students are almost structurally excluded. The criticisms towards the logic of 'development' is that it relinquishes the belief in the potential of learning and education, that one confuses teaching and education with providing educational care, that through a so-called realistic estimation of the capacities and differences between students their possible (learning) future is actually fixed from the very beginning, that students are essentialised and pinned down on their differences and that it eventually leads to certification that lacks validity because there is no common standard or point of reference for the evaluation.

The Attainment Targets as we know them today in Flanders subscribe to some extent to the "learning"-logic. This explains why a reconciliation with a "development"-logic is very difficult. The tension becomes further intensified to the extreme when from the logic of individual development the Attainment Targets are not only expected to differentiate in the support the students get (which is in line with the "learning"-logic), but also to differentiate in the outcomes one can expect from different categories of students.

Finally there is a second issue we want to stress. Our study was confined to the form and status of the Attainment Targets, and left out the issue of the content of (future) Attainment Targets. However, an issue that is relevant for the status and form, as well as the content of the Attainment Targets, is the question of the exact meaning of the often used expressions “minimal quality”, “society’s expectations on a core curriculum for all” and “minimal expectations”? The answer seems to be different and depending on which user of the Attainment Targets one has in mind. ‘Minimal’ seems to have at least two different meanings. When coming from society, the meaning of ‘minimal’ encompasses the core curriculum that is essential for all students (irrespective of the school they are attending) to be well prepared for proper participation in the society (or to have access to other levels of further education). ‘Minimal’ then means the concrete content of the core curriculum. Yet, one then needs to ask whether from the perspective of quality assurance (schools, governing bodies, umbrella organisations) the same definition is used. In the concern with quality assurance, it is not the Attainment Targets, but the school curricula who play the central role. From this perspective the most urgent matter is to warrant the educational quality, making the most important task for the Attainment Targets to provide the criteria to evaluate the minimal quality, or rather the core curriculum for all. Minimal then comes to mean ‘minimal criteria’ for curriculum development and curriculum evaluation.

Eventually this all boils down again to the question of what is the exact relationship between the Attainment Targets and the school curricula. Starting from the concern with quality assurance (with its central role for the school curricula) one seems to need first and foremost Attainment Targets that can operate as assessment criteria. From this perspective Attainment Targets are not expected to provide content or substance to the concept of core curriculum. Starting from the concern with quality control (with its central role for the inspectorate in safeguarding society’s expectations about core curriculum) one needs Attainment Targets that are sufficiently substantial, in order to be the incarnation in words of the core curriculum, that society requires for all schools and students. In essence it is an issue of the ‘division of labour’ between the Attainment Targets and the school curricula. Self-evidently this is

also related to the fundamental question who will receive which mandate in defining the goals of education and to develop the Attainment Targets and other instruments. In other words, the issue also touches on partly unspoken expectations in the complex relations between the content, the form and the development (design) of the Attainment Targets. It is necessary that those expectations are being made explicit and by doing so, can themselves become the object of debate or research.

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