

English summary  
of Fafo-rapport 2020:09

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## **Success and inconvenience**

Evaluation of the absence  
limit in upper secondary  
schools 2016–2019

**Final report**

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## Evaluation of the absence limit in upper secondary schools 2016–2019

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This is the final report from the project on evaluation of the absence limit, undertaken by Fafo in collaboration with Statistics Norway. The project's objective has been to evaluate the implementation and consequences of the decision that the government made in 2016 to establish an absence limit in upper secondary schools, which implies that a student who has more than 10 per cent undocumented absence in a subject will not be entitled to a semester assessment with a final or average grade for the subject in question. The absence limit was intended to serve a dual purpose: the government wanted to reduce absenteeism and increase school attendance in the short term, and in the longer term reduce early school leaving by encouraging a larger proportion of students to complete upper secondary education and obtain a certificate.

The report is organised around a series of research questions associated with different agencies and professions.

### 1 Followup and practical application:

- a) How are the schools following up absence and the absence limit?
- b) To what extent and how, if applicable, are the teachers, school leaders and any other agencies inside and outside the schools collaborating on followup of absence?
- c) Are the schools applying the absence limit unequally (cf. the provision on exemptions) – how and why?
- d) How are school owners following up and supporting the schools' practices and enforcement of the absence limit?

### 2 Consequences for the students:

- a) Has the absence limit helped reduce the students' rate of absence?
- b) In what way does the absence limit impact different groups of students?
- c) Does the absence limit have any effect on the students' learning environment?
- d) What are the consequences of nonassessment resulting in a grade of Not Assessed (NA) as a result of the absence limit for students who exceed it in one or more subjects?
- e) In what way does the absence limit affect students' completion of upper secondary schooling?

- 3 **Consequences for other groups of professions:**
  - a) How does the absence limit affect the work situation and resource use for teachers and school leaders?
  - b) How does the absence limit affect the work situation for general practitioners of medicine?
  - c) How does the absence limit affect the work situation for other actors/professions, if any?
- 4 **Registration of absence:**
  - a) Are the school owners and schools applying the same guidelines for when absence from part of a lesson should be considered late attendance and when absence should be registered for an entire lesson, applicable for the school year 2016–17? If yes, how many minutes late must a student arrive for a lesson in order to be registered as absent from an entire lesson for the school year 2016–17?
  - b) Did school owners and schools apply the same guidelines for when absence from part of a lesson should be considered late attendance and when absence should be registered for an entire lesson, applicable for the school year 2015–16? If yes, how many minutes late would a student need to arrive in order to be registered as absent from an entire lesson during the school year 2015–16?
- 5 **Additional research questions:**
  - a) How do different groups of students subjectively perceive the absence limit?
  - b) In the opinion of key pressure groups, what measures could be useful for encouraging higher rates of attendance?
  - c) What changes can be observed in absence rates due to the absence limit between general studies programmes and vocational studies programmes, or within different educational programmes?

The analyses are based on both quantitative and qualitative data as well as a combination of different analytical strategies. Registry data are the most important source of quantitative data and provide a detailed overview of daily and hourly absence over time. In addition, we draw on a number of surveys. The largest of these are the Student Surveys undertaken by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, which map out the students' experiences of and opinions about their own school and learning environment. In addition, we have collected a wealth of data through online surveys. These have provided insight into the principals' opinions and assessments of the absence limit. Furthermore, we have collected a comprehensive qualitative material, which includes interviews with principals, teachers, students, public health nurses, advisors and staff in the edu-

cational and psychological counselling services (PPT) and the county counselling services for young people who are outside the school system and labour market (OT) (N=145). As a result, we have information on what happens both inside and outside the classroom. We have sought to gain insight into the teachers' opinions on the absence limit, but also into how teachers and students are supported by other groups that are not directly involved in the work of the school on a daily basis.

In combination with the two previous subreports, the final report provides a broad picture of the experiences, challenges and opportunities associated with the absence limit among various parties. The evaluation can be summarised in three key findings: Data presented in all the reports have highlighted the success of the absence limit in terms of reduced absenteeism. A recurrent finding for all three years is that both hourly and daily absence have been significantly reduced. The most marked reduction occurred already in the first school year. In the following years, the rate of absence has remained fairly stable and at a lower level than before the introduction of the absence limit. The second main finding is related to implementation, and that the distance between implementation and normalisation may be short. The absence limit met with a lot of resistance during the first school year, but gradually came to be perceived as a part of the school system. The provision was a challenge to the trust placed in the students, but they appear to have acknowledged over time that the scheme is here to stay, because it works. The third key finding in the evaluation describes how this provision also can cause inconvenience – for principals and teachers who need to spend a lot more time registering absence and sending warnings to students, for GPs who are consulted by healthy students, and for students who are stressed by the provision and need to spend time and money on obtaining documentation. As a result of the absence limit, all groups of students are more often at school, but some groups have not reduced their absence rate sufficiently. Thereby, they receive a grade of Not Assessed (NA) in one or more subjects, and thus have greater difficulty completing upper secondary school and passing the final examination. How these three findings should be weighted and balanced is a normative issue. In our summary of the key findings we use the research questions as a framework for our presentation.

## **Followup, practical application and registration of absence**

Another key finding in the subreports and the final report is that the schools follow varying practices for registering absence, adapting to the regulations and following up students who risk exceeding the absence limit in one or more subjects. This seeming lack of a common practice for the absence limit, especially with regard to students who now risk receiving a grade of NA in multiple subjects, could mean that students in vulnerable situations are followed up diffe-

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rently depending on what school they attend, as well as internally in schools by different teachers.

This being said, it should also be noted that a large proportion of school staff are in favour of having an absence limit. In their opinion, the provision helps include large sections of the student groups, although some also express concern for vulnerable students. We point out that a certain habituation or normalisation has also occurred among the teachers. At first, the absence limit was a novelty, but after the first school year, the principals and teachers had learned more about the scheme and its consequences.

On the other hand, some of the teachers felt that the absence limit caused a lot of extra work, which we have referred to in the report as 'inconvenience'. This includes additional work involved in registering absence far more assiduously than previously. We cannot, however, find any indications that the absence limit has affected their inclination to quit their profession. Their administrative burden has certainly increased as result of the absence limit, but this does not seem to have had any impact on their working conditions.

## **Consequences for the students**

The data show that in light of its goal of increasing school attendance, the absence limit has been a resounding success. To be sure, absenteeism was declining also in the years prior to 2016, but the reduction after the absence limit was introduced has been significantly greater than what could reasonably be expected in view of the trends seen in the preceding years. In the school year 2016–17, total absence declined by nearly 18 hours. The following year saw a continued reduction, when compared to our prediction based on continuation of the same trend that was seen before the introduction of the absence limit. In the school year 2018–19, the reduction was somewhat smaller than in the preceding year. Overall, the average absence has decreased by 27 per cent from 2015/2016 to the years after the absence limit. Among students in the general studies programme, the rate of absence was lower on average than among students in the vocational training programme. The absence limit is also a success when measured in terms of changes in performance as indicated by grades. For example, an average student improved their examination grade by between 5.5% and 11.1% of a grade. A 5% increase in a grade means that one in twenty students in a class advances by one examination grade, while a 10% increase in the examination grade means that two students in the same class will increase their performance by one grade level.

While the first goal of the absence limit was to increase school attendance, the second goal was to reduce early leaving from upper secondary schooling. Early school leaving means that a student has failed to complete and pass upper secondary education after five years. Students who are absent from a subject for

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more than 10% of the time will be graded NA in the subject in question. Among students from immigrant backgrounds there has been an increase in the proportion receiving a grade of NA in one or more subjects, while this proportion has declined among students from the majority population. The figures show that irrespective of immigrant background, those who receive a grade of NA in one subject now tend to receive an NA in more subjects than was the case before the introduction of the absence limit. Preliminary analyses, however, indicate no changes in the likelihood of continuing to the next grade or completing and passing upper secondary education. Despite the fact that no more students than before receive an NA, students with an NA in one subject now tend to receive an NA in other subjects as well. On average, however, the proportion of students who receive an NA in at least one subject has not increased.

Spurred on by the School Student Union of Norway, a number of students expressed very negative opinions about the absence limit when this scheme was launched. The recognition that the absence limit has helped increase school attendance may help explain the declining resistance to it among the students whom we have interviewed during the evaluation period. In addition, most of the students who were took objection to the absence limit have now completed their education. New students in upper secondary schools now regard the absence limit as simply part of going to school.

### **Consequences for other professions**

In addition to principals, teachers and students, various others are also potentially affected by the absence limit. These include public health nurses, advisors and staff of the educational and psychological counselling services (PPT) and the county counselling services for young people (OT). These are professions that are included in 'the team around the student'. Their experiences have been included to provide a supplementary view of the way in which the absence limit has functioned for the students, especially the vulnerable ones among them. During the interviews, it emerged that the absence limit is a key topic in their meetings with many of the students.

A recurrent feature is the way in which the other professionals emphasise that a student is a 'whole person'. These were informants that were generally concerned about seeing students as people, not only as students. They wanted to see the whole person, and were not exclusively concerned about their level of absence, but would instead point out that the reasons why some students are frequently absent are diverse and complex. The importance of the family and its socio-economic position were frequently highlighted, i.e. conditions that are outside the scope of the school. These challenges give relevance to questions of how well the team around the student collaborates on finding optimal solutions, and what instruments are available. One conclusion is that the absence limit is perceived as

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a simple solution to a complex problem, especially when we include the students who have been discussed here as a part of the target group.

### **Consequences for the use of GPs**

As a result of the absence limit, students in upper secondary schools are now consulting their GP more frequently than previously, to judge from registry data on consultations with GPs. Other types of contact with the health services are also increasing somewhat. It appears that the change in GP contacts is due not only to an increasing frequency of consultations by students who already see their GP frequently; students who rarely go to the doctor are also seeing their GP more frequently. The effect size is independent of the parents' level of education, the students' gender or immigrant status, which is surprising, given the considerable differences in the baseline absence rate, especially between students with immigrant and majority status respectively. To avoid exceeding the absence limit, students with a high rate of absence have a greater need for GP consultations than their peers with lower absence rates. Another question has been whether the increased use of GP time by students causes patients who are not students in upper secondary school to be pushed out of the queue to see their doctor. Our analyses indicate that this is not the case, by comparing the use of GP time by persons who are not students in upper secondary schools with the use of GP time by children aged 0–4 years, whom we assume to be unaffected by the increased demand from students in upper secondary school.

Altogether, our analyses indicate that the GPs are more frequently visited by students in upper secondary schools, but without this resulting in any fewer visits by other patients. This may indicate that the GPs have received a larger total number of patients for consultation since the introduction of the absence limit.

### **The need for compensatory measures**

When the benefits are weighed against the disadvantages, there can be little doubt that the absence limit functions well and is an advantage for the vast majority of the students. They attend school more frequently and perform better. Many students also seem to have acknowledged this positive correlation. On the other hand, the evaluation has highlighted that some student groups need instruments other than the absence limit to be able to complete secondary school education successfully. In this context, it is relevant to ask whether the goal should be for everybody to complete upper secondary education. If this goal is maintained, this evaluation can be read as an argument in favour of further compensatory measures. Some are already in place, but this evaluation shows that further efforts are called for. In other words, the absence limit does not seem to be a quick fix that can prevent early leaving from upper secondary school. One explanation could be

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that students in vulnerable situations face very complex challenges. Some need more flexible learning arenas, others need closer followup, not least in terms of their life situation.

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