



English summary  
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## In the absence limit's blind spot

## In the absence limit's blind spot: Evaluation of the absence limit in upper secondary education. Report no. 2

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In this report we have analysed the absence limit in light of the students' experiences. It is the second publication in a series of three reports where Fafo and Statistics Norway jointly evaluate the implementation and consequences of the government's decision to impose an upper limit of ten per cent on undocumented absence in upper secondary schools. The objective of the first report (Andresen et al. 2017) was to analyse the way in which the absence limit was implemented – from the policy decision to local practice in schools. The main finding in the 2017 report was that absence rates have generally declined, although considerable variation was detected in the way in which schools applied the rules locally. This represents a form of unequal treatment that may have a significant impact on the students: some obtain exemptions from the absence limit that others are denied. Such unequal treatment that goes beyond the provision on discretionary judgement in the regulations violates the democratic principle of equal treatment. Even though the scheme has reduced student absenteeism, last year's report gives reason to claim that the rules have produced some unintended consequences.

Last year's report thus assumed a top-down perspective. The objective of this year's report is to investigate how the limit to absence is perceived and handled by the students – what their coping strategies are and what the consequences are for various groups of students. This report thus assumes a bottom-up perspective, and the analyses in the report are organised in light of these five questions:

- By how much has absence been reduced for different groups of students?
- How are students experiencing the enforcement of the absence limit?
- How are students dealing with the absence limit?
- What consequences of the absence limit can be identified?
- How do schools practise the absence limit?

We have attempted to answer these questions with the aid of various types of data, not least by combining qualitative and quantitative information. In addition to registry data and data from the student survey, the analyses are based on a web survey sent to all principals of upper secondary schools in

Norway, as well as interviews with students, teachers and administrative staff members at the schools that were selected as cases. Moreover, we have undertaken supplementary interviews with school nurses and advisors.

In this year's report too, the most important finding is that the absence limit reduces absenteeism and increases student attendance at school. Since the introduction of the limit, an average student in upper secondary school has reduced his/her absence by approximately 20 per cent or 15 hours per year. However, there are major variations in the reductions of the rates of absence among different groups of students. Our analyses show that those who have the highest rate of absence at the outset have also demonstrated the greatest reduction in absenteeism.

Increased attendance was one of two main objectives behind the introduction of the absence limit. The other objective was to reduce the rate of attrition, but increased attendance and reduced attrition are not necessarily two sides of the same coin. Even though being deemed 'not gradable' (IV) in one or two subjects is not equal to attrition, which is defined as completion within five years and is thus too early to measure, we believe that a student with an IV note is at a higher risk of attrition than if he or she had received a grade. Although the proportion of students with an IV note decreased in 2016/2017, as it did also in previous years, the conditional risk of IV increases in all groups. However, it increases most among those who have a high risk of an IV at the outset, who are identical to those with a high rate of absence. Thus, it appears that even though these students reduce their rate of absence to a significant extent, they do not reduce it sufficiently to fall below the ceiling limit for absence of 10–15 per cent.

An estimate of the relationship between an IV and the positive consequences of attendance in the form of an improved grade shows that approximately one student in each class would improve their results in Norwegian and mathematics by one grade on average. On the other hand, one student in each upper secondary school in Norway would have an IV in one or more subjects, and our analyses imply that this could be avoided if the absence limit were disregarded. In the report we therefore argue that the absence limit has a polarising effect, by pushing the students further apart in a situation where the goal is to complete upper secondary school. The students' perception of the absence limit corroborates this impression. They observe that there is less absenteeism and truancy, but they also refer to some students who have dropped out of school and to the fact that many are given an IV note.

We have interviewed students who have high, medium and low rates of absence, as well as some who have been warned that their undocumented

absence is approaching the limit. This is on the whole a fairly heterogeneous group, who reacted to the absence limit with a variety of coping strategies. Some refer to the importance of distinguishing between teachers who are strict and teachers who use discretion in their recording of absence. Others report to consider the absence limit as an entitlement to a maximum of ten per cent absence, and thus save up days to use at the end of the school year. Many told us how they attempt to obtain medical certificates that go far back as well as far ahead in time and therefore can be reused, so-called 'carte blanche' certificates. However, the students also see that the absence limit entails some negative consequences in addition to their impression of increased attrition and IV ratings. Some students tell us that they themselves or others whom they know come to school when they are ill. The absence limit also appears to affect the trust between students and teachers; in the study, many reported to feel that they had been stripped of their autonomy and responsibility. Analyses based on the student survey show that the sense of well-being had declined somewhat among students in the programme for general studies. This may indicate that the resistance to the absence limit is about trust and stress, just as much as about difficulties in adapting to the new rules.

This year, the analyses of the survey among principals and the interviews with teachers and school administrators focus on how schools are working to address and adapt to the ways in which the students deal with the absence limit. The analyses of these data appear to show that medical certificates do not always function as intended. Teachers see that students go to see a doctor even when they are far below the ten per cent absence limit, and even though students are free to do so, many teachers hold this to be unnecessary. In some cases, teachers also suspect that students present forged medical certificates. On the other hand, teachers are also concerned that medical certificates fail to reach those students who really need them. It also seems as though the schools adapt to the absence limit in different ways, and in some cases it seems that the teachers in one and the same school follow different procedures for practising the regulations.

At the end of the report we raise some questions regarding the legitimacy of the absence limit. One of the main findings in this report is that this limit entails different consequences for different groups of students. Since the absence limit appears to function positively for many students, but that this comes at the cost of a smaller group, we may ask whether this measure really can be considered a success. Is it conceivable that all positive figures that show increased attendance have caused the group of students who have greater difficulty in completing upper secondary school now than they had

before the introduction of this measure to fall into the absence limit's blind spot?

Many interviews support the view that the absence limit has come at the expense of those whom a school nurse referred to as 'the very, very weakest students'. This notwithstanding, there are many who claim that the absence limit should remain in place. In that case, we should ask what kind of measures should be enacted to remedy its negative consequences and how they might be implemented. Next year's report will address some of these questions. In it, we will seek to explore some of the experiences that various groups have gained with the absence limit. This will involve looking at how students in different educational programmes, students in different schools and students from different family backgrounds have related to the absence limit.