Educational equity and teacher discretion effects in high-stake exams

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SUMMARY

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Standardized tests serve to provide objective measures on student performance and these can be high stakes for students as they often determine, at least in part, retention and graduation decisions. Two recent empirical evaluations performed in the United States (Dee, Dobbie, Jacob, & Rockoff, 2019) and Sweden (Diamond & Persson, 2016) provide strong evidence that allowing for teacher discretion in grading standardized exams gives reason for policy makers to be concerned. Our study adds to this emerging body of literature on local grading, teacher discretion and test score manipulation (see, also: Burgess & Greaves, 2013; Hanna & Linden, 2012; Lavy, 2008) by evaluating teacher discretion and scores on high-stakes standardized exams at the end of secondary education in the Netherlands, using large-scale administrative data for all examinees in the period 2007-2012.

Stark discontinuities are observed in the exam grade distribution for high stakes retaking students and are located at important graduation thresholds. This phenomenon is systematically related to the level of discretion when grading the exam, with results suggesting that approximately 11% of all graduating retakers did so because of teacher discretion. This yields unequal graduation opportunities that are the result of school- and subject choice patterns, since teacher discretion is structurally and selectively exerted at the school-level with the objective to let students on the margin graduate. Teacher discretion effects are targeted at students who find themselves just below the passing threshold and effectuated when the stakes are highest and when there is full information on how to convert assigned points to grades (i.e. at retake exams and at students who need to improve their performance in order to graduate).

In response to these results, the Minister of Education Arie Slob has asked the Dutch Testing Agency (CITO) and the “College voor Toetsen en Examens” (CvTE) to examine how the exams can be organized differently, such that there are no informational discrepancies between first and second attempt grading procedures. The results of this evaluation are scheduled to become available in the second half of 2019. Furthermore, ACLA has been asked to examine what the potential consequences of the aforementioned teacher discretion effects are with respect to successive educational success and labour market outcomes. In particular, we will analyse whether or not students actually benefit – in the long term- from teacher discretion and to what extent such effects are heterogeneous across subgroups of students, tracks and subjects. For this, we will use rich administrative data on educational enrolment, graduation and labour employee data from Statistics Netherlands. The results of this study
should become available in the academic year 2019-2020 and will hopefully further facilitate the ongoing debate on optimal assessment policies in the Dutch education system.