

European benchmarks for Dutch education

If the Netherlands wants to join the ranks of the top knowledge-based economies in Europe, it will need to pull out all the stops. The Education Council believes first and foremost that we need to invest in more graduates in exact sciences such as mathematics, technology or the physical sciences.

12 May 2003

Europe aspires to be one of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economies in the world by 2010. Achieving this ambition will require more effort in education. Five concrete objectives (benchmarks) have been formulated to measure progress in each EU country. One of these is to increase the number of exact sciences graduates by 15% by 2010. The Netherlands is one of the worst scoring countries on this aspect: between 1993 and 2000, their numbers actually fell.

Strengthen ties with business and industry

To turn the tide, we need to strengthen ties between education and the business community. By actively engaging businesses, for example, it would be possible to increase the relatively small number of research jobs in the private sector.

Encourage interest in science subjects

The Education Council would also like to see better support for initiatives such as Axis, that aim to get young people interested in studying the sciences. The appeal of science subjects needs to be given a boost. At the same time, a debate is needed on the question of *whether* and *how* the appeal of arts studies and social and behavioural studies can be reduced.

Proper coordination is important

On the other four educational benchmarks (reducing drop-out rates, increasing the number of pupils that attain upper secondary school-leaving qualifications, raising the educational achievement of 15 year olds, and increasing participation in lifelong learning), the Netherlands scores higher than the European average. However, the group of leading countries is not yet in sight. This means that extra efforts are required here too. Achieving these objectives will require not just efforts by the business community, but also proper coordination by the various ministries. In particular, these are the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Furthermore, hard work will be needed to solve the problem of teacher shortages.