

Improved transitions in the education system

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“This problem actually belongs to no one in particular.” In a nutshell, this is the nature of the issue of transitions in the Dutch education system. And indeed, the most noteworthy aspect of the phenomenon of impeded transfers and difficult transitions between educational institutions is in fact that the responsibility for this is perceived as diffuse. At the same time, everyone is aware of the consequences: premature school leaving and insufficient students moving on to higher forms of education. This challenge must be met. But how? That is the subject of this recommendation.

The loss of pupils and not enough pupils reaching a sufficiently high level of education are two problems the education sector has been faced with for a long time. Moreover, these are problems that require a multi-faceted approach. This recommendation is, however, restricted to the relationship between the transitions in the education system on the one hand and the pupil drop-out rate plus insufficient yield on the other. The key question of this recommendation is therefore: how can we optimise the transitions in the education system in order to limit premature school leaving as far as possible and allow pupils to choose the study programmes to which they are best suited?

Problem: drop-out and too-low educational level

There are very many transitions in the education system. It all starts in the primary education sector where the transition from kindergarten (in the Netherlands: primary years 1-2) to primary school proper (in the Netherlands: starting with primary year 3) is a big step for many children. Transitions occur between the primary and secondary education sectors and between the secondary education and senior secondary vocational education or higher education sectors, with all the fine details that each different learning pathway entails. At each of these moments, new choices have to be made and pupils have to adapt to a new course of study. Most pupils manage to cope well but too many still encounter difficulties. We therefore need to improve the transitions, especially given that the European Union has agreed that more people must attain higher educational levels.

Request for advice: how can the transitions between the educational sectors be improved? The education system has been faced with pupils and students dropping out and with impeded transfers for quite some time. The Minister of Education, Culture & Science has already taken many policy steps aimed at improving the situation but further reference points are still being sought. The Minister has therefore asked the Education Council to examine the way in which improved transitions in the education system could contribute to reducing the drop-out rate and increasing the yield. Thus, the key question in this recommendation is how to optimise the transitions in the education system in order to limit premature school leaving in as far as possible and allow pupils to choose the learning pathway to which they are best suited. The Council believes that this can be achieved by improving education programmes (in terms of both content and methodology) and by providing guidance in the learning pathway at moments of transition. This means that although pupils will have to shift up a gear, the government and educational institutions will ensure they are helped by a following wind; many pupils cannot do it on their own.

The Education Council is delivering this recommendation at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture & Science. The Minister has been wrestling with this issue for quite some time – and has already taken many policy steps – but feels that further advice is desirable. The Council adopted a broad orientation approach comprising talks, literature analysis and an inventory study covering every sector of the education system. After considering its findings the Council arrived at the following three recommendations.

Three recommendations

1) Responsibility for continuous paths

This recommendation is focused on the fact that the education system must provide continuous paths for pupils and students. This requires the cooperation of various groups: schools, parents, but also the local governments, which bear particular responsibility for young people until the age of 23 years. For example,

the local governments could ensure that it is known which pupils are regularly absent and are in need of assistance. Cooperation between VMBO [pre-vocational secondary education] and MBO [senior secondary vocational education] schools already exists and needs to be expanded further and followed up, so that the pupils can 'cross to the other side' properly. Some schools have already introduced an extra year between primary and secondary school devoted to improving the language skills of a specific group of children. For pupils who have a great deal of real difficulty with school, it is necessary to introduce a third form of special education (time-out, rebound facilities and the like).

The government needs to work on modifying the funding system and further elaborating the principle that 'money follows students'. Financing therefore has to be able to travel from one sector or type of education to another with ease. An innovation fund could be established specifically to deal with transition problems. This will enable the development and distribution of, for example, longitudinal education methods based on scientific evidence ('proven effective'). The education world could gain more benefit from the many initiatives and experiences if the Ministry of Education would draw attention to the various efforts and collect the results.

2) Additional learning periods

The Council believes that the strict scholastic year and duration of educational courses form a hindrance for a number of young people. More flexibility could be created by allowing or even encouraging additional learning periods. The Council believes that the building up of courses should no longer be discouraged and that it should actually be encouraged if the pupils or students would benefit. In addition, repeating a year should not be avoided and should be considered as a serious alternative to dropping out. Other options include tempo differentiation throughout each scholastic year and the establishment of summer and weekend schools.

3) Long and short-term career support

The development of career analysis and guidance for pupils and students is an important tool for facilitating the transitions between courses and sectors. This would entail setting down a profile of the strengths and weaknesses of pupils. Such profiles would have to be adjusted regularly – and at least once a year – based on the pupil's most recent performances and behaviour. This portable profile would act as a supplement to continuous pedagogic guidance and would be of great importance with a view to the ties between pupils and their school. Tools that could be used include: personal interviews/guidance, electronic portfolios and digital pupil files. And also: plenty of input from parents and pupils in order to increase pupil development and their involvement in the education system.

A short-term approach is to offer practical assistance at transition moments, such as assistance in registering at a new school, obtaining a grant, buying textbooks and the like. Young people from under-privileged backgrounds in particular could benefit from this support. And finally: truancy policy. The Council strongly urges that a strict truancy policy as is currently practiced in some parts of the Netherlands be introduced for all schools and educational institutions. No absence should pass unnoticed. Apart from "convenience truancy" when school days are used as an extension of a holiday period, a great deal of truancy is an early warning sign of premature school leaving. In the period following a transition the chances of truancy or dropping out are increased. However, schools could structure the educational learning process in such a way as to make truancy more difficult. The observance of compulsory attendance must also be reinforced by regulations.

Conclusion

In this recommendation the Council has set down a number of ways to better harmonise educational practice with government policy. An important basic principle is to use the learning pathway as the point of departure for measures aimed at improving the transitions. Awareness within the educational institutions will increase their attention and policy making. Taking responsibility for the pupil during his or her pre- and post-learning pathway will increasingly be part of the culture of the school or institution concerned.

Flexibility and consequently increased retention of participation and ultimate success can be achieved by bringing government funding more in line with the – sometimes changeable – course of learning pathways. In several instances the Council has indicated that regulations and legislation need to be revised in order to facilitate a smooth through flow. In this respect, the Council regards the move towards harmonising the education acts as a promising and commendable development.