

Higher education for half of the Dutch population

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How can we increase the number of people with higher education? This question is the focal point of the recommendation at hand. State Secretary Rutte put this question to the Education Council in connection with the objective of raising the percentage of the Dutch professional population with higher education towards the 50% mark. To this end, participation in higher education must be increased. This objective is the Netherlands response to the EU agreement concluded in Lisbon in 2000 that set down the aim for the European Union of growing into the strongest knowledge economy in the world within the next ten years. The Education Council supports the government's objective and this recommendation sets out a number of the Council's proposals for achieving it.

According to the most recent information, 24% of the professional population in the Netherlands has enjoyed education at the university or college of higher professional education level. This percentage has to be increased dramatically. The number of school-leavers transferring from HAVO [senior general secondary education] and VWO [pre-university education] to higher education is already very high in the Netherlands. The issue here is not only to increase participation but also to ensure that students complete their studies. In addition, an area for attention is the fact that after completing primary school, some 60% of pupils go on to VMBO [pre-vocational secondary education]. The transfer to higher education along this path is much more difficult. Moreover, some sections of the population are under-represented and the percentage of older people with higher education is considerably lower than 50%. A substantial increase can be achieved by stimulating and facilitating participation in higher education by these groups.

An obvious way to bring the objective closer would be to correct the international statistics. A study carried out for this recommendation showed that the Netherlands only recognises certificates of WO [academic higher education] and HBO [higher professional education] as higher education while in other countries higher forms of junior and senior secondary vocational education are also recognised. An international quantitative comparison cannot therefore accurately set the standard for where the Netherlands currently stands. Given that the Dutch certificate structure differs from that of other countries, correcting the figures would not be easy. Furthermore, it is not particularly useful to attempt to climb further up the statistics ladder in this way because it would not bring us any closer to achieving the substantive objective of raising the thinking and working level of the entire Dutch professional population.

The basic premise of this recommendation is that the possibility must exist at all educational levels for pupils, students, the employed and the unemployed to develop their talents in such a way that they can attain the highest educational level possible for them to achieve. In addition, the labour market has to be structured in a manner that enables the talents developed to be put to optimal use. To allow room for all talents it is important that acquisition and selection that takes place at different moments throughout the education process has a positive impact. Pupils must be encouraged in terms of what they can achieve and not – as is too often the case – assessed negatively in terms of what they fail to achieve. The latter approach can cause our society to lose a great deal of its talent. Furthermore, everything must be done to help people make the most of their capabilities.

In advance of its proposals, the Council outlines several trends regarding the number of people with higher education in 2012 and 2022. The forecasts indicate that demographic developments, among other things, are forcing a dramatic effort to be made towards achieving a substantial increase in the number of people with higher education.

The Education Council suggests an approach in this recommendation that broadly runs along three, partially overlapping lines.

1. A range of learning pathways that is as broad as possible for pupils at every education level aimed at enabling them to move on to higher education.

In the first place, the stumbling blocks that hinder the optimal development of talent within and between the various types of education have to be removed. To this end it is desirable that right from the transition from primary to secondary education, advice provision and guidance is handled creatively so that pupils are able to make a well-considered choice. This choice will have some effect on pupils being able to flow through to higher education. An important factor is the possibility of building up educational courses in order to flow through as far as possible along less usual paths and to prevent premature school leaving. This option should no longer be regarded as being inefficient. To achieve this a change in policy is needed together with supplementary measures to ensure the smooth transition from any given education sector to another.

The secondary education and vocational training sectors must also pay increased attention to talent. One of the methods in this respect is the further expansion of follow-up programmes connecting secondary education/senior secondary vocational education on the one hand and higher education on the other. These programmes need to promote the smoothest possible transitions and prevent premature school leaving. In addition, establishing short programmes for higher professional education would probably induce a considerable number of talented people from the senior secondary vocational education sector to flow through to higher professional education. The expansion of the diversity of higher education through the introduction of short, two-year courses is in line with European trends: the so-called European qualifications framework includes a 'level 5' that actually does not exist in the Netherlands.

Finally, a great deal can be expected from the improved use of the potential of sections of the population that to date have not – or hardly – participated in higher education. In more concrete terms, this concerns students who have the capability of being the first in their family to flow through to higher education. This category largely consists of Dutch students whose ethnic background has its roots in Surinam, Turkey or Morocco. Currently, these potential 'first generation students' often follow courses at VMBO level [pre-vocational secondary education] or MBO level [senior secondary vocational education]. Increased attention therefore needs to be focused on these education sectors. In this regard, the major elements for attention are proper guidance in the making of choices concerning further education and intensive encouragement and guidance during the course of the chosen educational path. This approach would simultaneously limit premature school leaving in so far as possible.

2. More diversity in and a higher yield from higher education

Measures are also needed that deal with the higher education sector itself. Raising the level of participation in higher education goes hand in hand with increasing its differentiation: offering a greater variety in the higher education range. In addition, study skills need to be improved and students need to be more closely tied to their educational environment. Furthermore, students from the new Dutch citizens category need to have an improved labour market perspective.

Providing greater diversity *within* educational sectors requires a flexible system that offers many opportunities for students to compile learning packages themselves, in terms of duration, intensity and instructional formats, for example. An increased differentiation *between* educational sectors can take various forms. This recommendation sets down three forms: level differentiation, a more open system, and cooperation between government-funded and non-government funded institutions with regard to the performance of (accredited) courses.

The strengthening of the study skills of students and the strengthening of their ties with the educational environment would also contribute to increasing the yield. This element requires a great deal of investment, especially in the early months of a course of study. In this respect, special attention needs to be paid to first generation students in the form of a specific language policy, among other things. This could include language proficiency tests, language bridging courses and attention to language-based elements of the curriculum.

An important area for attention is the labour market perspective for students who are new Dutch citizens. In practice, these students already face problems when seeking work experience placements. Research has shown that when seeking employment these students lack adequate networks and are faced with negative attitudes and possible discrimination. However, employers who desire more graduates of higher education will have to make use of the available new-Dutch graduates who are currently not getting a 'fair deal'.

3. More employed and unemployed people to higher education

Outside regular education (i.e. in the rest of society) there is talent available that to date has not been put to use. A great deal can be expected from various measures that could be taken to change this situation. The most important of these measures are the 'accessibility' of educational facilities, a sound testing and accreditation system for competences acquired elsewhere (recognition of prior learning), making use of the potential available in new target groups and sound financial preconditions.

The 'accessibility' of educational facilities can be improved by creating a learning-working desk for lifelong learning, in mutual cooperation to be incorporated into the front office of the ROCs [Regional Training Centres], colleges of professional education and universities. In this way, information provision about the available study options would be made physically accessible. Inextricably linked to this is cooperation with (regional) employers regarding the offering of combined education and work packages. Such cooperation could strongly encourage employed persons to turn to learning.

The question of whether or not someone has enjoyed higher education is not answered by the production of a certificate of higher education alone. People can attain an equivalent working and thinking level in a variety of ways. What is important is that it must be possible for this level to be properly determined. For this reason, both unemployed and employed persons would benefit from a well-organised system of testing and formal accreditation or certification of competences acquired elsewhere. A statutory regulation could provide the necessary structure as far as financing and certification procedures are concerned. Examining boards for (groups of) higher education courses play an important role in the organisation. Although examining boards are closely linked with the courses, certification independent of learning pathways is of crucial importance, as competences acquired elsewhere do not necessarily run parallel to qualification attained through regular educational programmes.

An important point for attention is the assessment of the competences of such target groups as women re-entering the workforce and highly-educated refugees. For the latter group, the priority lies in developing a suitable testing method. Nuffic [Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education] is currently working on such a method.

And finally, the financial preconditions. To encourage employees to undertake further schooling, the recommendation is that the government offer financial incentives to both the employee and the employer. For employees this could take the form of grants for mature-age students. For employers, tax breaks could be re-introduced whereby part of the costs they incur would be met.