

Diversity in scale

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The Council wishes to draw attention to the fact that, in recent decades, government policy for almost the entire sector has been strongly focused on the merging of institutions and boards. This is reflected in the figures relating to the size of boards and institutions. A continuing trend towards increases in scale is also present in current policy. The belief is that increases in scale are beneficial to the quality of education and to pupil transfer rates. However, this development also has undesirable effects on the freedom of choice of participants and parents, on the management of educational organizations and on the social cohesion within the institutions. The Council believes that the benefits of the increases in scale should be weighed more carefully against the disadvantages. In its assessment entitled *Bureaucratizing in het onderwijs* [Bureaucratization in Education] (2004), the Council had already focused on increasing bureaucratization as playing a role in this situation. These recommendations investigate these and other disadvantages of increases in scale and suggest ways of counteracting such negative effects.

These recommendations are based on a number of questions. What effects do increases in scale have on the freedom of choice of participants and parents, on the basis of support of the educational organizations and on the social cohesion within the institutions? What are the consequences of those effects on the main parties involved, namely participants and parents, education staff, further education institutions and future employers? Should the Minister interfere or does the autonomy of the institutions and boards in fact mean that the central authorities should adopt a more reticent approach?

The Council has ascertained that there is still no real hard proof of the negative effects of increases in scale. However, there are more and more indications that the position of the various parties involved in education is weakening. The Council also wishes to point out that the government regulations are hindering organizational reductions in scale at institutions.

Effects on freedom of choice

Freedom of choice on the part of the participant implies a variety in the education offered with regard to a number of characteristics such as size, education concept, range of courses, identity and culture. The Council has observed that mergers between educational institutions can, in some areas, reinforce the formation of monopolies and, with that, obstruct the freedom of choice of the participant. Particularly in the vocational training and adult education sector and at higher professional education level, certain regions have only one or two education providers.

Once a participant has made a choice, this choice will also have to be guaranteed. As regards decisions by boards regarding relocation, discontinuation and changes in the education concept or identity, the interested parties will be approached via the formal channels, such as the participation council. In practice these procedures do not appear to generate much influence.

Effects on the management of the institutions

This brings us to another important effect on the board of the institutions, namely a possible legitimacy deficit. Legitimacy does not occur of its own accord and instead has to be acquired. More autonomy, more budget and more volume means that the institutions and boards are under greater pressure as regards internal and external legitimacy. Institutions are acquiring more and more autonomy and have to employ increasing numbers of specialized staff. Larger schools find it easier to be independent than smaller ones. However, a growing number of student, parent and staff representatives have indicated that the distance between them and the boards of the institutions is increasing while there has been decrease in their own influence on the goings on in the organization. Also, further education institutions and future employers are less familiar with the educational content, which is why the institutions have difficulty linking up effectively with the employment market.

Another effect has already been referred to in the assessment entitled *Bureaucratizing in het onderwijs* [Bureaucratization in Education] (2004). In this document the Council highlighted the mechanism of budget maximization. This has to do with the fact that boards and managers sometimes tend to pursue increases in

scale, not because that is in fact better for the education provided, but due to the side effects in terms of prestige and career. Research by the Council has also shown that the costs of the secondary process in education (administration and management) have increased considerably over the last twenty years.

Effects on social cohesion

The larger educational institutions become, the greater the danger that the internal and external exercising of influence becomes more of a formality rather than reality. In connection with this, the level of involvement in the organization appears to be decreasing. There is less mutual contact and this leads to feelings of anonymity and alienation. The social cohesion between the people who are part of the organization appears to be lessening. Any professional who does not feel involved in the organization runs the risk of gradually losing his or her enthusiasm for the primary process. This effect occurs particularly at the organizational executive level, in other words at the level of locations and units. There seems to be a direct link between the quality of the organization and the quality of the direct work with pupils. Creating a socially binding climate characterized by clarity, ease of recognition, space for development, norm-referenced management and self-management and the creation of an identity is important for the primary process. Such a climate is not only beneficial to the wellbeing of pupils, participants and students but also to the wellbeing of professionals.

Recommended measures

In order to guarantee the freedom of choice of participant and recipient, the Council advocates that the Minister is assigned a more prominent role with regard to assessing proposed mergers involving an expected market share of more than 50%. Criteria that, for example, the NMa (*Nederlandse Mededingingsautoriteit*) [Netherlands Competition Authority] applies to other sectors, such as the care sector, can serve as an example. Merger assessments like this carried out by the Minister are primarily relevant to higher education, the vocational training/adult education sector and secondary education. As a result, educational institutions will have to report planned mergers beforehand, a procedure referred to as the obligation to report.

Freedom of choice is expressed in the possibility to choose from a range of schools and colleges. If the range is limited and the number of external options as regards schools and colleges decreases, the options offered at the schools and colleges will become more and more important. In such situations, it is essential to maintain a variation in internal courses on the basis of, for example, supervision by the Inspectorate.

In order to make it easier to provide tailor-made education, the Council advocates a relaxation of the regulations relating to annexes, exploration of the possibilities for demerging and creating legal possibilities for increasing the autonomy and independence of schools.

In order to guarantee the legitimacy and proper governance, the Council advocates an expansion of the circle of those parties with a direct interest in decisions relating to schools and courses. The Council proposes that, at primary and secondary education level, the authority to recommend of the (entire) participation council in the event of a transfers or mergers of schools with another school be changed into an authority to endorse in the WMO (*Wet Medezeggenschap Onderwijs*) [Education Participation Act] (shortly to be renamed the WMS (*Wet Medezeggenschap Scholen*) [Schools Participation Act]). The Council also proposes that parents are designated as parties with a direct interest within the meaning of the AWB (*Algemene Wet Bestuursrecht*) [General Administrative Law Act] in the case of decisions on the relocation or division of schools.

Lastly, the Council regards it as important, in this context, that the board and management in all education sectors project an image of being at the service of the primary process. The Council advocates a continuation of a board and management culture of self-effacement.

In order to guarantee social cohesion, the Council advocates policy rules which are more neutral as regards scale through the imposition of a certain fixed basis for smaller-scale establishments in primary and secondary education and by investing in smaller-scale accommodation. It also has to be possible for the circle of internal and external interested parties to assess large new construction plans in senior secondary and higher professional education as regards their smallness of scale.