

Basic qualifications

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Many young people have problems at school, yet most of them keep attending school until they have obtained a proper diploma. A small but not insignificant minority, however, drop out prematurely. One of the considerations contributing to this decision is the high level of basic qualification in the Netherlands; the learning routes leading to this qualification also play a part. A good level of education is important to enable one to find a job and a place in society.

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In the Netherlands, the basic qualification is the final level of MBO-2 courses (MBO = senior secondary vocational education). It is one of the educational levels that young people can attain. The assimilation of young people into the labour market is a flexible process, in which a multitude of factors plays a role. There is, however, no one-to-one relationship between the basic qualification level and being able to make a start in the labour market. A more accurate description of the system is an ascending series of educational levels, each offering more opportunities to secure a job. Although the term "basic qualification" seems to suggest otherwise, it is not the only qualification level providing access to the labour market. In the Council's opinion, the term is rather ill-chosen in this respect. The use of the basic qualification concept should not result in the undervaluation of other educational levels. The basic qualification must be regarded as a good level of education: young people who have obtained a basic qualification may be expected to hold their own in occupational practice. That does not mean, however, that young people with lower educational levels would be without any prospects in the labour market. It is with this caveat that the concept of basic qualification is used in this recommendation.

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The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has requested the Council to tackle the following questions.

- What are the requirements that qualifications at the basic vocational training level must meet in order to continue to fulfil the policy objectives attached to the basic qualification?
- What government actions are called for with regard to those that have not yet reached the basic qualification level?
- In what ways should education or guidance in learning processes be provided for the group that has not (yet) obtained a basic qualification?

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The questions posed already indicate that early school leaving plays an important part in the debate on the basic qualification. Early school leaving is an important issue in the Netherlands and, on a European scale it is no less a problem. In the Netherlands, any young person who has not yet obtained a basic qualification and is no longer enrolled in any course leading to such a qualification, is regarded as a premature school leaver or drop-out. Consequently, the level of the basic qualification is one of the factors contributing to the extent of early school leaving. School drop-out rates are comparatively high in the Netherlands. This (persistent) problem has been receiving attention for quite some time, but policy efforts are becoming more significant now that agreements on this subject have been made in a European context. The fact is that early school leaving has been incorporated into a benchmark system, which the European countries use to draw comparisons among each other. The reason behind this is the ambition to make Europe one of the best performing regions of the world.

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Excellent performance calls for high educational levels among the European population. Society and the economy are becoming increasingly knowledge intensive such that people must learn ever more. One of the measures to realize this goal is the introduction of a target level, such as the basic

qualification. As already outlined above, the Council intends to exercise due care when using this concept. Whether or not a person acquires a job depends on an interaction of various factors, including his/her educational level, the views of the employer and the situation in the labour market. This does not alter the desirability of the general ambition to raise the overall educational level within society. If our point of departure is the principle that the basic qualification level is one step on the ladder of educational levels, it is still important to gradually raise the standards.

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In this respect, the recommendations do point out a dilemma. The fact is that raising the target level will result in a decrease in the number of pupils attaining that level, which would have an unfavourable effect on the position of the Netherlands in Europe. In other words: the threshold must be high, because the labour market demands flexible and highly qualified people; at the same time, as many pupils as possible need to obtain a basic qualification. The latter is also of importance to promote social cohesion within society. The Council emphasises that the intended raise in standards must be implemented gradually and that it must be smoothly adapted to the needs of the labour market.

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Irrespective of the trends in the average educational level, the government must, in addition to its standing policy, develop a new policy for the young people that have not yet reached the basic qualification level. Various ministries are already taking measures to encourage young people without basic qualifications to continue in education, whether through a job or otherwise. Policy measures pertain to VMBO (pre-vocational secondary education) and MBO (senior secondary vocational education) and are additionally aimed at drop-outs. Initiatives are also being developed in a European context.

The Council is of the opinion that the government must develop a new policy towards young people without a basic qualification. This policy must be focused on the concept of competencies. In order to be able to function in society and in the workplace, one needs certain knowledge and skills. Yet such competencies need not be acquired at school; by definition, practical experience can also lead to achieving a particular level. The new policy must place the emphasis on the recognition of competencies acquired elsewhere.

To warrant proper assessment and recognition, the acquired competencies must be accurately specified in qualification levels or assessment frameworks. These may be developed on the basis of existing assessment frameworks, such as the (revised) qualification structure for vocational education. Another option is to link up with the European reference structure, which is under development. One function of the system could be to award sector-related certificates, in line with the qualification system employed by government-funded schools. The Council proposes that the State Secretary take the initiative to set up a joint certification strategy covering all sectors and government-funded education

The Council is of the opinion that young people should be entitled to take part in one or more assessments, free of charge. Such assessments provide insight into the level at which the young person functions and could form the basis for establishing an educational route. Furthermore, the Council advocates greater flexibility in the funding of the education and guidance provided to these young people, with a greater say for the young people themselves. Reference dates do not quite fit into this picture.

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In connection with the certification referred to above, the Council is in favour of streamlining the current education system. This can be effected by bringing the various sectors of education more in line on the crucial aspects of transitions ("warm transfer"), content of the curriculums, examination systems and content of the exams. Made-to-measure solutions are needed for pupils who, without appropriate support, run the risk of leaving school without a basic qualification and for those that have already left. Dealing with young people (or improving the way in which they are approached) with a view to proper qualification requires personal attention, calling on expertise from within and

outside the school and valorisation of diplomas or certificates relating to (work) experience gained. This approach must be grounded in a clear structure.

The support provided to young people must be set up on a regional basis. It is important that the various authorities involved gear their efforts aimed at young people to each other in a chain structure, in which the municipalities would have to fulfil a facilitating role. The (flexible) funding needs to be adapted to this structure.

According to the Council, the made-to-measure routes in such a qualifying structure must be flexible in terms of duration, location, content and funding. The extent to which the various institutions are involved may vary. The Council, therefore, recommends dualisation and flexibilisation of learning routes for young people who have not yet obtained a basic qualification and have left or are about to leave daytime education. By organising flexible learning routes (either short or longer) within a dual education structure – aimed at attaining at least the basic qualification level – schools will be better equipped to seize upon the individual situations of many young people. The Council proposes that the outlines of such a revised organisation structure be developed on the basis of the experiences gained with these forms of practical learning.