

## Transfer and talent development

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### *Introduction*

The Council regards this study as a maintenance plan for the education offered to twelve to eighteen-year-olds. The Dutch secondary education and vocational training sectors are quite successful in teaching large groups of students. More and more students are entering senior general secondary education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO); an increasing number of students transfer to senior secondary vocational education, higher professional education and university education after secondary school. There are, however, also some concerns. For example, the growth in the number of young people who obtain basic qualifications appears to have stagnated and the level of knowledge of students with a diploma is sometimes below the standard required for progression to further studies. In addition, it remains the case that relatively few students choose science and technology programmes.

Furthermore, secondary education (VO) and senior secondary vocational education (MBO) still don't offer sufficient real progression opportunities for young people who follow a non-standard paths. In combination with the system of relatively early selection, this lack of flexibility hinders some young people in developing their talents. For example, the advisory report entitled *Fulfilling Potential* [Presteren naar Vermogen] shows that over 10% of students in secondary education achieve a lower level than testing at primary level had shown was possible. Moreover, the Netherlands has the ambition of further improving education.

### *How can the transfer and talent development of twelve to eighteen-year-olds be advanced?*

To tackle the problems of educating twelve to eighteen-year-olds, this study by the Council has resulted in an agenda of 'maintenance work' for secondary education and senior secondary vocational education that could contribute to improving transfer opportunities and the development of talent. The maintenance work often comes down to simplifications that offer schools and teachers a greater scope. To this end, we examined the following five factors that influence transfer and talent development: programme structure; programme content; career orientation and counselling; incentives structure; and the role of teachers.

### *Agenda for improving transfer and talent development*

The education offered to twelve to eighteen-year-olds should present a greater challenge in order to achieve a higher level and it should offer more transfer opportunities to students who do not immediately follow the right path. Major changes to programme structures are not needed. Even minor changes such as introducing flexible limits on study duration could significantly improve transfer opportunities. Levels need to be better guaranteed, particularly by defining learning standards. Also, the orientation phase when choosing further or a career needs to become firmly embedded. The scope in the current funding system for rewarding schools who offer smooth transfers and tailored study programmes is underutilised. The Council also calls for investments in training for teachers aimed at improving their skills in better recognising the talents and transfer opportunities of students. Finally, the Council recommends that an evaluation and development plan for secondary education and senior secondary vocational education be drafted that shows how the two types of education are interlinked. The maintenance proposals are explained point by point below.

#### *1) Programme structure: from guaranteeing programmes to guaranteeing transfer*

Dutch secondary education and senior secondary vocational education are characterised by strong differentiation and early selection. The strength of the system is that it provides focused programmes for those students who know what they want and what they are capable of at an early stage. The weakness of the system is that students who are less clear about this can end up taking the wrong path. To prevent talent being left untapped in this way, it is essential that flexible transfer opportunities within and between school types are guaranteed. This means that existing obstacles to transfers have to be removed. Rules that limit the duration of secondary education studies may seem to be efficient, but in the long term their impact is often ineffective because they can result in

students dropping out unnecessarily or entering senior secondary vocational education without having first obtained a diploma.

The offer of programmes in the preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) sector is currently quite obscure and should therefore be reduced to a limited number of broad, professionally-oriented programmes within which there is still scope for students who need a more focused programme to specialise. Similarly, the structure of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) seems to be unnecessarily complex. Instead of the distinctions between MBO 1, 2, 3 and 4, it would be more realistic to distinguish between short programmes (the current MBO 1 and 2) and long programmes (the current MBO 3 and 4).

At least one in three students will choose vocational education. It is extremely important that this is not educational 'leftovers', but rather first-class education regardless of whether it will be the student's final stage of education or a step in their educational progression. The quality of vocational education should therefore be undisputed. The funding per student and teachers' pay should reflect this quality.

*2) Programme content: from guaranteeing programmes to guaranteeing completion level*

To improve the transfer to subsequent study programmes, the Council calls for guaranteed levels rather than guaranteed programmes. Students who complete secondary education or senior secondary vocational education should have obtained at least an adequate level in the key subjects of Dutch, English and Maths. To achieve this, learning standards should be introduced for these subjects in the lower years of secondary education, establishing the minimum knowledge and skill levels that students must demonstrate. These learning standards should be defined at three levels (basic, standard, and advanced). A pass in these subjects in the final exams of HAVO and VWO should be made compulsory.

*3) Careers guidance: learning to make choices earlier, but more importantly better*

A lot of time and talent is lost because students make inappropriate study choices and subsequently join a queue to wait for an alternative path. In secondary education and senior secondary vocational education, students should therefore learn to choose a study programme and profession with prospects. This can be done by allowing students to familiarise themselves with the study opportunities available to them at an earlier stage. In this regard, it is unrealistic to expect that all students will have a clear vision of their future at an early age. However, a broader orientation could help them to form a more realistic picture of their study and career options.

*4) Incentives structure: remove incorrectly functioning incentives, introduce beneficial incentives*

Incentives for schools do not always encourage the improvement of transfer and talent development. Where possible, financial and institutional incentives should therefore be deployed more effectively. For example, making the rules regarding the duration of secondary education study programmes more flexible is desirable if we want to reduce the number of students entering MBO education without a diploma. A vertical connection between MBO levels 1 and 2 and preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO), achieved by introducing simple organisational links and continuous learning pathways, would also be helpful in this respect.

In addition, the Council recommends looking into the possibilities of providing financial incentives for 'overlap classes' (dakpanklassen), which allow students more time to choose the right study path, 'opportunity classes', which offer students with borderline grades the chance to transfer to a higher-level path than would otherwise be possible, and tailored programmes. HAVO opportunity classes could, for example, facilitate both the pre-diploma and post-diploma transfer from junior general secondary education (MAVO) to senior general secondary education, thereby mitigating and correcting the impact of selection errors in the first years of secondary school. Students would be able to put their talent to better use by reducing the waiting times for students who repeat a year or change their programme. Finally, through its league tables, the Education Inspectorate could encourage schools to expand participation in science subject clusters.

*5) The role of teachers: investment in training*

Teachers play a central role in the transfer and talent development of students. They are responsible for recognising shortfalls in levels and for taking timely action to ensure that learning delays do not happen or get any worse. Teachers do this on the basis of their professional knowledge and by keeping up to date with developments in their field. The teacher training programmes offered by universities should explicitly devote more attention to the skills needed to identify and remedy learning delays before it's too late. Investment in the training standards of teachers is of essential importance.

*Evaluation and development plan for secondary education and senior secondary vocational education*

In conclusion, the Council recommends that the Minister and the State Secretary draw up an integrated evaluation and development plan for secondary education and senior secondary vocational education. As this study shows, both types of education have much more common ground than you might at first suppose. All existing policy evaluations and draft plans will be combined in this new evaluation and development plan. The maintenance plan set out in this study could form the basis for the new plan. In addition, a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of school dropout prevention activities warrants special attention, given that there are indications that the number of young people with basic qualifications has recently started to stagnate.