

## Reinforcing Knowledge II

6 September 2007

The quality of education presents a varied picture: some indicators paint a positive picture, while others seem to contradict this. The Education Council thinks the most sensible thing to do is to focus the debate about the quality of education on the common denominator. In other words, the things that teachers and instructors, pupils and students agree on. There is nothing to stop us from improving education standards – the will and ambition are there, and there is room for improvement.

### **Impetus: the wish to guarantee the level of knowledge**

In a 2006 study entitled *Reinforcing Knowledge in Education*, the Education Council made the following recommendations with a view to improving the position of knowledge in education.

- Ensure better monitoring of the level of knowledge: more information about the level of knowledge in all sectors is desirable.
- Rectify knowledge deficits in the subjects of Dutch language and maths. In higher education, study programmes should organise activities to bring basic knowledge of Dutch and maths up to the required standard. The Minister should encourage the identification and rectification of knowledge deficits when students enter higher education.
- Improve the system for establishing and recording curriculum content: make the system for establishing and recording curriculum content more transparent and involve the education community in this more. For each curriculum component, indicate what is essential and what is peripheral.
- Keep the focus on curriculum content, even during process reform: the structured knowledge areas should remain the central component in teaching. When making process improvements, attention should not shift to the detriment of the curriculum content.
- Maintain and improve the teachers' level of knowledge: the subject matter knowledge of teachers should remain up to standard.
- In the sixth recommendation, the Education Council argues that we need to aim higher: the Netherlands deserves a higher standard of education.

The Education Council has invited the education community to respond to these recommendations in writing. Parts of the study and some of the written responses have been tested in two regional debates. The outcomes can be found in this follow-up advisory report.

### **What shape is Dutch education in?**

The various indicators show a mixed picture of the level of knowledge and performance in the Dutch education system. International comparisons such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) show that Dutch youngsters up to fifteen years of age score relatively high. The Inspectorate has also discovered that most schools in the Netherlands perform well within their own reference group. On the other hand, although the average level of skills in the Netherlands is comparatively high in international terms, there is room for improvement when it comes to the achievements of the brightest students. It was also found that higher education institutions often offer preliminary courses or admission tests to allow students to brush up or renew their basic skills. Furthermore, primary education performs below the standard recommended by experts from the *Periodic Survey of Educational Achievement* (PPON). It is therefore not easy to draw any clear conclusion on the level of knowledge in education or whether the standard is rising or falling. This is one reason why the Education Council calls for greater standardisation of curriculum content, for example, by introducing learning standards in primary education and in the lower years of secondary education.

The general conclusion drawn by the Education Council from the available data is that it is the ambition of education professionals to raise the standard of education.

### **Maintain the recommendations from the study**

Taking all responses into account, the Education Council notes that the education community is largely positive towards the provisional recommendations. Some criticism was directed against some aspects of the recommendations and questions were raised about their implementation.

The recommendations from the study are largely supported by the education community. Three of the recommendations from the original study remain unchanged in this follow-up report. These are:

- ensure better monitoring of the knowledge level;
- keep the focus on curriculum content, even during process reform; and
- maintain and improve the teachers' level of knowledge.

Following consultation with the education community, the other three recommendations (rectify knowledge deficits in Dutch language and maths; improve the system for establishing and recording curriculum content; and raise the standard of education) need to be deepened, expanded or amended. The Education Council therefore makes eight new recommendations.

The first two of these recommendations focus primarily on primary education and the lower years of secondary education.

#### *1) Introduce learning standards for primary and secondary education*

It is essential that standards for Dutch language, English and maths and arithmetic are better guaranteed. All pupils must have attained a minimum standard of knowledge by the time they leave school. Learning standards for primary education and the first years of secondary education would give schools clarity on what is expected of them and on where concrete improvements can be made. All pupils should meet these standards at the minimum level.

#### *2) Concentrate curriculum content*

To create and maintain room for the basics, a critical look needs to be taken at the required curriculum content and, where necessary, it should be reorganised.

The three following recommendations are primarily focused on the transition to higher education.

#### *3) Guarantee the basic level via examinations in senior general secondary education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO)*

The Education Council proposes tightening the requirements for the examinations in Dutch, English and maths in HAVO and VWO. To qualify for these school-leaving diplomas, pupils should have to obtain satisfactory grades in the three subjects. To improve the transition from MBO [senior secondary vocational education] to higher education, the Education Council recommends a study is conducted into the desirability and possibility for MBO 4 pupils to participate in HAVO examinations for subjects that are relevant for the transition to higher education.

#### *4) Reach agreement on admission to higher education*

The Education Council urges MBO, HAVO, VWO, HBO [higher professional education] and university education to come to a joint agreement on the desired entrance level for higher education. Students will then be able to judge for themselves whether they possesses the minimum standard of knowledge required to embark on a higher education study programme without the risk of failure. If certain knowledge is lacking, a student can then take extra courses, preferably before the start of the studies or during the first phase of the study.

*5) Promote **mutual examination\*** in higher education [\* het is niet meteen duidelijk in het Engelse wat dit betekent – verdere uitleg of een betere term is wenselijk in de Engelse tekst]*  
Where possible and where there is support for doing so, the Education Council recommends that **mutual examination** is promoted in the higher education sector,.

The sixth, seventh and eighth recommendations are focused on raising the standard of education.

*6) Guarantee a uniform, broad-based level of cultural knowledge*

The Education Council recommends that measures are taken to ensure a uniform level of cultural knowledge is achieved by students in higher education and four-year MBO.

*7) Create a culture of intensive education*

To raise the standard of education, the Education Council recommends intensifying education.

*8) Increase time and effort students give to education*

The will and ambition of teachers and students to perform better is an important factor in raising the standard of education. To accomplish this, pupils and students will have to give school and their studies a more prominent place in their lives. Regardless of the actions taken to guarantee a basic standard of knowledge and to raise the standard of education, teachers, pupils and students are all in it together. And what they all agree on is that it is possible to take education to a higher level.