

Secondary and Higher Education for Adults

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Reason for the exploratory study

In a society where people no longer stay with one employer for their whole life, where they can choose to be self-employed whenever they want, where the general level of development makes high demands, and where new technologies follow each other rapidly, meaning that knowledge and skills rapidly become out-of-date, opportunities for ongoing training need to be available in sufficient supply. A more highly educated population is part and parcel of a vital economy and society. The Netherlands has ambitious targets, including having 20% of the adult population participate in lifelong learning activities. Participation is currently around 17%, and provision is unsystematic.

Considerations for adults to enter education can be very varied. Because of this variety, the use of a target percentage for participation is not especially meaningful. It is more helpful to look at the variety of motives. This study looks at the possibilities that are available for the relevant adult groups to participate in education. The study focuses on education for those with a secondary (MBO 4) or higher educational background. What options are available to the Minister for Education to optimise the supply and demand for secondary and higher education among adult learners, taking into account the four functions of the education, and to enhance its impact on the various target groups?

Four functions of learning are key

Good quality initial education forms the foundation of a knowledge-based society. What can be learned early does not need to be learned again later. There are, however, circumstances where this is not always possible and later learning is needed in these cases. The Ministry should focus its lifelong learning policy efforts in particular on removing unnecessary obstacles so that the four basic functions that the Education Council assigns to adult education can be fulfilled:

- *Repair:* anyone who did not attend school at a young age, should be able to catch up later.
- *Change in career:* anyone who later in life discovers that they want to do something else or discovers other talents, should be able to follow a programme of study to make a change.
- *Keeping up-to-date and getting ahead in society:* adults need to keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date in order to retain their place in the labour market and to work on improving their position.
- *Socio-cultural and personal function:* people learn not only for their working career, but also to continue their personal development in a general sense.

Demand: short-track programmes most popular

In 2005, more than half of the professional population took part in at least one short course. Many fewer people took part in longer programmes leading to a qualification (2.9% of people over the age of 30). These popular short courses often - but not always - lead to recognition by an industry association or a government body.

Little information is available on the nature of demand for adult education. The information that is available seems to indicate that there are three obstacles to adults entering education. Firstly, many adults lack the time: adults have a different daily routine than young people because they have different key activities (work, family). Furthermore, they are also not fully aware of the training opportunities available. Finally, they are insufficiently aware of the funding options. It is unclear what the potential and latent demand is among non-participating adults; also unclear is why these people are not following some form of education.

Selection of what's available

The range of what is currently available has grown through practice rather than from any underlying vision. The offering is unsystematic. Training available from public providers has largely grown from the initial programmes (supply-driven). The private market has arisen as a result of the growing demand. Most adults who participate in education (90%) follow a programme from a private provider.

The study shows a selection from what's available, ordered from level 4 to level 7 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Some conclusions are as follows. The private sector offers various full-length, high-quality programmes (approved universities of applied sciences and approved research universities). For adults not looking to gain an award, a broad range of training and courses is available in the private sector. In the public sector, regional training centres (ROCs) offer programmes at level 4 (plus) of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) as well as training and courses for groups of professionals on behalf of their employers. However, there is scarcely any focus on individuals looking for education and training. The universities of applied sciences offer courses and full-length programmes at levels 6 and 7. Their part-time offering is minimal in many fields of study. A number of universities of applied sciences have been found to offer highly-rated part-time studies ('Guide to Part-time Studies'), in particular primary school teacher training colleges. Universities have a lot less to offer adults. The Open Universiteit has the job of providing academic study programmes or higher professional education, but focuses primarily on the first category. Part-time studies are in short supply at the universities, and the quality is not always high. It often takes the form of 'drop-in lectures' or 'guest auditing', where adult learners simply join in with lectures provided for the full-time students. A recent development is the move by two universities to make some learning materials available via the internet. While part-time master's degree programmes are available at the universities, the tuition fees are the same as for full-time. An exception is formed by the executive programmes at the research universities and the universities of applied sciences, for which higher tuition fees are payable (from €8,000 to €30,000). On a final note, PLAR projects (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) are running at the ROCs, the universities of applied sciences and private training providers.

Control mechanisms in the sector

Adult education generally tends to lack congruity. As such, there is no overarching control or regulation. In the course of the years, however, certain actors have adopted a controlling role in certain areas. For example, apart from the government (through the ministries responsible for education, social affairs and economic affairs), this also includes adult education providers and labour market actors. There are now dozens of ideas and initiatives being deployed to provide a stimulus to education and training, with a view to raising and improving labour market participation. Lifelong learning is a much debated topic, but proposals are converted into concrete actions in very different ways. Large businesses, in particular, are active in this area.

Government policy

By law, higher education programmes (both academic and professional) can be given full-time, part-time or as sandwich courses (*duaal*). Since the mid 1990s, the government's policy has been based on the Lisbon objectives.

An important milestone for the development of lifelong learning is the system of formal recognition of what someone has learned outside the education system. PLAR (prior learning assessment and recognition) was developed for this purpose. Current policy devotes a lot of attention to the implementation of PLAR procedures. PLAR can encourage people to embark on further studies because an award can be earned quicker by avoiding the need to repeat things already learned. Yet a degree of caution is advised. Some people question whether the education that PLAR replaces might in fact have more added value than PLAR. There is also the concern that PLAR opportunities would encourage younger people in particular to leave the world of learning early because they see it as an attractive alternative. It is therefore important to look not just at the intended effects, but also to carefully evaluate the actual side-effects.

Furthermore, in February 2005 the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment launched a Learning & Working project directorate to work on the creation of 'learn & work desks' in various regions of the country. Another concrete result of the project directorate is the launch of the associate degree programme (short professional programmes leading to an award) at level 5 of the EQF.

Quality control

Study programmes in the public segment of adult education may only be offered if they meet certain quality criteria. Diplomas recognised by the government may only be awarded by institutions who have made it through the quality control process. Quality is assessed by several organisations, in particular the education inspectorate and the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). However, just because a study programme and an examination are not recognised by the government does not mean that their quality is necessarily poor. Quality may also be assured by an industry association or a professional body, and there are many examples of this. Yet this only accounts for part of the overall offering, and it is not always clear what forms of assessment there are and what value prospective students should attach to them.

Current support from government and social partners

The government uses a variety of financial measures to raise awareness of the four stated functions of adult education. For instance, tax breaks are available to people in respect of the costs they incur for training for a profession. The government also provides ad hoc financial support (grants) for study programmes that could help alleviate certain shortages in the labour market. To a limited extent (so far at least), the government also provides information to potential participants. Similarly, other organisations and groups take measures to help adults in their decision on whether to follow a programme of study. Other forms of support includes privately funded scholarships, financial contributions from health insurers and secondment agencies, as well as discounts on study programmes for alumni. The business community also facilitates education on either a collective (e.g. through sectoral funding) or individual company basis. Large national and international organisations often have their own training funds. Furthermore, various parties provide support in the form of information, coaching and study assistance.

The key message: match the functions of adult education: clearer EQF offering, more choice in awards

The key message from this study is twofold. Firstly, it is important that more clarity is obtained in the existing offering. Secondly, it is important to zoom in on the obstacles posed by time, funding and information, obstacles that demand action by government, business and individual participants. Gaining more insight into the offering could be achieved by working on the basis that the offering is a two-component system: private (non-government-funded institutions) and public (government-funded institutions). In its recommendations, the Education Council puts forward ways to strengthen both components, but also to strive towards better matching and synergy between the two components.

No sense of urgency; for many, lifelong learning is a non-issue

Although lifelong learning has enjoyed a lot of attention over the past ten years at the policy level, the Education Council believes that some sections of the business community and some individuals are not giving enough thought to the four functions of lifelong learning. Larger businesses often (but not always) have a clear policy on staff training and development, but this is often not the case for small businesses. Their ideas on the meaning of staff training and development is less clear. Many adults sometimes take part in a course, but few rarely think about the need or desirability of dealing with their personal development in a more structured way. The culture change embarked on recently should therefore certainly be continued in order to enlighten these groups to the functions of lifelong learning. The government cannot achieve this on its own, but it does play an important role and must therefore continue to get the message out: a good initial education alone is not enough; lifelong learning - whether through learning on the job or through training programmes and courses - is the reality of our time. Personal development will have to become something that everyone is continually working on, and businesses will need policies to support this.

Offering: strive towards balance

How, in these circumstances, can the government ensure that more adults think about and work on their personal development in a more structured way? One way is to work on the basic conditions: an educational offering that is clear and appealing, good accessible information on the options, and sufficient insight into the funding opportunities available from the government, the business community and the individuals themselves. A variety of funding mixtures could be created for each function of adult education. The Education Council's recommendations are in line with this and also set out some possible improvements. As already mentioned, the

offering of secondary and higher level adult education is regarded as a two-component system: public and private. The Education Council would like to strengthen both components, but would also like to achieve a better degree of balance between the two components, for example by creating more synergy between the two components.

Effect of training is unclear

The key question from the recommendations also relates to the *effects* of lifelong learning. This question still seems to be a difficult one to answer. Studies usually tend to focus on individual financial performance (a higher salary) and often fall short of methodological standards. The existing study seems to suggest that the effects are varied. Further study into the effectiveness could therefore make an important contribution to gaining clarity on who benefits, how they benefit and which courses provide the benefit. Finally, study into the social benefits (such as the effects on health, prosperity and labour market participation) of training is scarce.

Recommendations for private education

Recommendation 1: grading according to the Dutch National Qualifications Framework (NQF) / EQF levels

A start has been made on a National Qualifications Framework as the Dutch counterpart of the EQF. The NQF offers opportunities to strengthen the private component of secondary and higher education for adults. The privately offered education, in particular, would benefit from improved transparency and accessibility if at least some of the training available was structured along the lines of the EQF.

The Education Council proposes the idea of delegating the task of grading to a separate body. This body should engage with representatives of employers and employees in the professional field, and with representatives of the training providers. It should primarily be made up of independent grading experts. Whether a private or public variant should be chosen is a decision for another time.

Recommendation 2: award 'stacking' and oversight

'Award stacking' - i.e. the accumulation of qualifications earned and recognised prior learning - should be developed along the way. Award stacking needs properly equipped examinations committees and supervision of their quality. In government-funded education, supervision is the responsibility of the education inspectorate; in the private sector, it is a voluntary arrangement. The Education Council suggests that it might be reasonable to consider further alignment of both forms of supervision on this aspect. With regard to award stacking, both components of secondary and higher education for adults share an interface. The two forms of supervision could learn much more from each other.

Recommendation 3: consumer protection

Both the dispute resolution commission and the examinations appeals procedure which exist for private education are important steps towards proper consumer protection in the private component of secondary and higher education for adults. The addition of a central reporting point for bad practices could offer participants more protection. The existing mechanism of student protection in public education could perhaps serve as an example for the situation in the private segment. At the same time, though, the public component could also learn something from the private component.

Recommendations for public education

Recommendation 4: extra funding for four 'part-time institutions'

In some regions and across certain disciplines, the part-time offering is limited. The minister could start a tender procedure for the provision of socially desirable education in part-time adult education where this is currently unavailable.

The Education Council considers it desirable that apart from private providers, there are also some regionally diverse public institutions with an extensive offering for adult learners. We therefore call for extra funding (perhaps temporarily) for a small number of institutions (research universities and universities of applied sciences) if they demonstrate a willingness to specialise in adult education, especially for part-time students. The Education Council proposes the idea of a tender procedure, open to both public and private institutions, to

select the four part-time institutions Studies could be used to permanently monitor whether the training they provide remains suitable.

Recommendation 5: broader access to examinations

Both in the public and private components, procedures are being developed or have already been put into practice for the assessment and recognition of prior learning. Furthermore, the public sector could make use of private examination options. Candidates who, regardless of their previous education and their qualification or competencies, believe they are ready for an examination should be allowed to take it. The Education Council calls for broader access to examinations for adult learners at the level of secondary and higher education. This broader access could be achieved by the institutions for secondary education, higher professional education (HBO) and academic study (WO), or it could be achieved through the establishment of a joint or independent examinations body for higher education.

Recommendation 6: increase demand through open learning resources

Adults often choose not to study presumably because they believe they do not have enough time for it. The Education Council believes that distance learning and e-learning (via the internet) offer the best opportunities to get adults interested in learning. Many teachers and institutions in secondary and higher education already use digital learning resources or are working on introducing them. Public providers could open their doors in this way. Furthermore, there is an international movement in higher education towards open access to information resources. Its aim is to make knowledge available to all more rapidly, more transparently and at low or no cost. Institutions for secondary and higher professional education could do more in this way to make course materials available on the internet for free.

General recommendations

Recommendation 7: more transparency and better access for prospective students

The Education Council makes a number of proposals to make the offering more transparent and more accessible for adults. First, the public institutions could be clearer about whether they also provide learning for adults. The minister could create an indicator for this purpose to indicate the percentage of adult learners at a given institution.

In respect of the funding mixtures, the Education Council asks - as others have previously done - why the threshold for the tax break is currently so high (€500). Could this not be lowered? Options include the total abolition of a threshold or a much lower threshold (for example, €50). It is likely that some sort of threshold may be needed to avoid extra work for the tax administration.

In brief, the government can do a lot to strengthen the functions of adult education, but without the support of the labour market (employers and employees) will not be able to make any great steps forward in lifelong learning. This can only be achieved if more and more employers and employees are made aware of the various functions described above.

Final note: legal framework in due course?

A number of recommendations set out above have implications on the prevailing legislation. Changes would be needed to existing education legislation and to the legislative aspects of certain aspects of privately funded adult education. The changes could be achieved separately from each other. At the same time, it may be worth giving thought to the possible added value of a single act to regulate all secondary and higher education for adults that covers all aspects of the private components and the public components - and their increasing synergy, as already indicated by the Education Council.