

Disproportional differentiation in the Dutch education system

Highlights of the Education Council report on the state of the Dutch education system in 2019

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Growing challenges for education

Dutch education faces greater challenges today than for many years. Social changes with lasting impact are demanding a great deal of education and also have consequences for the education system.

First, Dutch society is becoming increasingly complex. The urban population, in particular, is highly diverse in terms of language, ethnicity and culture. The way in which people interact and form relationships and communities is also changing. A process of social segmentation can be discerned in which society is dividing along educational, income and sociocultural lines. The sociocultural dimension differentiates between people based on their responses to the question of who they are and where their loyalties lie. In addition, each group has its own provisions and services. In short, there are fewer opportunities for people with different social and cultural backgrounds to meet. This begs the question of how education could be organised in a way that strengthens social cohesion.

Increasing use of technology is having a major impact on education. Robotisation and other technological developments can take over certain tasks from humans, lead to the disappearance of some occupations, change existing roles or create new ones. In addition to knowledge, these new developments also demand skills, such as the capacity for interdisciplinary thinking, collaboration and digital literacy. The labour market is becoming increasingly dynamic, and people will change jobs or roles more frequently in the future. Work is increasingly difficult to pin down in fixed categories, and many people already combine different activities, for example part-time self-employment alongside a paid job or a pension. These developments create a growing need for training and education, and that also has consequences for the way education is organised.

Responding adequately to societal trends requires an integrated vision of the education system. However, current education policy mainly focuses on individual sectors, with too little account taken of the broad perspective of the education system as a whole. There is a danger that the accumulation of small-scale policy or legislative measures, while changing the system, may not do so in the desired direction and may not properly address underlying problems. The Council therefore sought to answer the following question:

Can education fulfil its social mission now and in the future within the existing organisational framework?

The social mission of education

As a public provision, education has a social mission with three key elements:

1. Education ensures that the labour force is adequately educated and trained; a strong economy and high prosperity require well-educated people;
2. Education contributes to the quality of society. Societal well-being, cohesion and stability depend on strong social ties in a society where people are able to respect and live by the values that underpin the constitutional democracy;
3. Education offers equal opportunities to everyone for (lifelong) education, development and training.

Systemic adjustments needed to counter excessive differentiation and the lack of facilities for lifelong education

The Council believes that a fundamental rethink is needed of the way the education system is organised, with a view to modifying some elements. The Council sees three particular problems, two of them related to the differentiation within the education system (see box). The differentiation not only reinforces the tendency towards social segmentation and reduces the scope for education to contribute to wider social cohesion (problem 1); it also impedes access to and progression through education, reducing the educational opportunities available to some groups of pupils and students (problem 2).

The third problem is linked to the increased need for lifelong training and education. That is not only a responsibility of individuals, but also of companies and government. However, facilities for lifelong education does not form part of the current education provision within the system (problem 3).

Features of the configuration of the Dutch education system

1. Differentiation into sectors (e.g. primary education, upper secondary vocational education (MBO), higher education), different school types within those sectors (e.g. upper secondary general education (HAVO), pre-university (VWO)), different levels (e.g. MBO 2, 3, 4), different learning pathways (e.g. preparatory upper secondary vocational education vocational track (VMBO-kb) or upper secondary vocational training (MBO-bol) and different programmes (Bachelor's or Master's).
2. Sharp distinction between general and vocational education, and between mainstream and special education.
3. Early selection: pupils are advised at the age of 11 or 12 on the appropriate placement in secondary education.
4. High degree of autonomy for education establishments thanks to the freedom of education and associated lump-sum funding.

The Dutch education system comprises a wide variety of education categories, which are subdivided into sectors. To an extent, this differentiation is functional; it structures the educational provision and enables pupils and students to progress through the education system in a variety of ways. It also offers young people whose capacities and interests are not clear at a certain point to develop and qualify at an appropriate level or within a suitable programme.

In the past, problems stemming from excessive differentiation in education levels, types and programmes has in many cases led to fundamental reforms. The government has intervened on several occasions in a bid to create greater cohesion between the different parts of the education system and to simplify and streamline the system. The 1968 Secondary Education Act (the *Mammoetwet* in Dutch) was for example an attempt to create a more unified secondary education structure, with different levels of ability and a system of horizontal and vertical progression pathways. However, over the last ten years the differentiation has started to become problematic once again. The three problems highlighted above are explored in more detail below.

Problem 1: Young people from different social groups no longer encounter each other automatically in a differentiated system

As stated, people from different social milieus increasingly live in segregated groups and no longer encounter each other as a matter of course. This social segmentation can also be seen in education. It begins in the pre-school phase, with fragmented provisions organised around differing objectives and aimed at different groups, with the result that children at risk of disadvantage are in many cases permanently segregated from other children. In primary and secondary education, children and adolescents from different social groups often attend different schools. This is partly because pupils and students with the same social background tend to live in the same neighbourhood, where they also go to school. In addition, schools sometimes explicitly play on the

freedom of choice and wishes of parents, promoting themselves as a cultural school, technical school, provider of Cambridge English or new subjects, specialist education or education based on particular religious or didactic principles. This differentiated supply can lead to segmentation, with adverse outcomes.

The segregation between sectors, school types, learning pathways and programmes also means that different groups of pupils and students no longer encounter each other as a matter of course. Figures from the Dutch Education Executive Agency (DUO) show that almost three-quarters of all secondary school students in the Netherlands are enrolled in broad school communities combining all the different school types. However, they also show that in the majority of cases the different school types are sited at different locations; only 18% of pupils at these school communities go to a school located on a site where all school types are present.

If young people from different social backgrounds no longer meet each other at school, they are less exposed to pupils or students with different ideas and values. School should be a place where young people can gain experience in handling conflicts, engaging in dialogue, tolerating different opinions and behaviours, showing respect for those who think differently and arriving at a consensus. Schools are the perfect place for young people to learn how to deal with differences. Reducing the opportunity for this hampers the ability of schools to prepare young people for life in a pluralistic and democratic society and limits their contribution to broader social cohesion.

Problem 2: Increasing emphasis on early selection

A highly differentiated system means there is a relatively large number of selection moments and transitions from one sector, learning pathway or programme to another. Matching and selection need to ensure that pupils and students end up at the right place in the system.

Pupils in the Dutch education system are selected at a relatively early age for the transition from primary to secondary education – usually at around age 11 or 12. Some pupils benefit from this, but children from a low socio-economic milieu and late developers often do less well from early selection. There is a high risk that they will not end up in the type of education that best suits their capacities and talents.

Early selection is less of a problem if pupils have an opportunity to transfer to a different education type at a later stage, based on their capacities. Yet this scope for mobility is reducing: the different school types are frequently in separate locations, and there are fewer broad-based transitional classes. Figures from Statistics Netherlands (CBS) show that the share of pupils who are placed directly into a particular school type in the first year of secondary education has risen sharply in recent years; fewer and fewer pupils spend their first year in a mixed-ability or broad transitional class.

The segregation between vocational and general education has also reduced the opportunities for mobility. Much attention has been devoted in recent years to improving the progression through the vocational column (especially from preparatory to upper secondary vocational education (VMBO to MBO); much less thought has been given to the links between vocational and general education.

The declining mobility within the system means that where pupils are placed in secondary education increasingly determines the course of their school career. This is leading to greater 'path dependency', whereby it is more difficult for pupils to deviate from the school type in which they are placed. There are fewer opportunities to correct their initial placement in secondary education, thus delaying or diminishing the educational opportunities for some pupils. In addition, there is increasing pressure on the transition from primary to secondary education.

Equal opportunities

The Council stresses that equal opportunities should not be about equal outcomes, but about creating equal opportunities for everyone to receive the best possible education. This also means creating equal chances to make the most of the opportunities that education has to offer.

The opportunities for progression and transfer after secondary education also appear to be reducing due to the growing use of matching and selection processes in upper secondary vocational (MBO) and higher education. The emphasis in MBO is more on matching than on selection, while in higher education local selection processes have emerged in recent years in the form of motivation letters, interviews, entrance exams, supplementary maths and other tests, binding study advice and stricter transfer criteria. Additionally, an increasing number of Master's programmes at universities and universities of applied sciences set additional requirements over and above the standard access qualification.

Problem 3: The system has no provision for lifelong learning

A dynamic society and labour market place different demands on citizens and employees. Education and training is no longer something that exclusively precedes paid employment; rather, a combination of working and learning is needed which continues throughout a person's educational and employment career. Continuing vocational training is important for participation in the labour market and in society, as well as for the personal education and development of the individual. These goals are thus linked to the social mission of education. The present system – which is designed primarily for children and adolescents, and focuses much less on (working) adults – is not adequately configured to support lifelong learning.

Facilities for lifelong learning are not yet an inherent part of the education system. Impediments to this include regulations, funding and a silo mentality between partners within and outside education, leading to fragmented provision which is neither very demand-led nor readily accessible. This puts those with a low and intermediate education level, in particular, at a disadvantage, given that people are increasingly responsible for shaping their own educational and employment careers. Not surprisingly, therefore, participation in training by these groups is low, and the opportunities for education and development outside the labour market are very limited.

Towards a solution: five starting points for adapting the education system

The problems described above require a number of adaptations to the education system. Ensuring the best configuration of the system is complex: measures taken to improve some parts of the system can introduce weaknesses in other areas. To guide the thinking and discussion about necessary reforms, the Council has formulated five 'starting points', which bring together a number of the Council's recommendations.

Starting point 1: Reduce differentiation where useful and possible

To mitigate the hard segregation between different education types, the Council recommends giving consideration to where differentiation can be reduced within the system. The Council sees opportunities for this in the provisions for young children, in secondary education and in upper secondary vocational education (MBO).

Integrate provisions for young children

Combining reception and teaching provision for children aged up to 4 years by merging pre-school and early-school education, childcare and playgroup activities would create a broad and accessible provision for young children, perhaps under the aegis of primary schools. Primary schools would then be able to offer children from infancy right through to the age of 12 a smooth transition between the infant, nursery, pre-school and primary school phases.

In the pre-school phase, children can learn through play under the supervision of suitably trained staff from the pre-school and primary school sectors. This provision should be available on a voluntary basis for all children aged between two and a half and four years, offering sessions on five days per week. It would thus not be offered only to children with disadvantages (socio-emotional, cognitive or linguistic). This would mean that all children were reached and that children at risk of disadvantage would not be segregated from other children. With a view to ensuring equal opportunities, the Council believes it is important to invest as early as possible – and permanently – in preventing and reducing disadvantage.

Cluster the learning pathways in preparatory upper secondary vocational education

The Council has already called for the structure of preparatory upper secondary vocational education (VMBO) to be simplified by clustering the different learning pathways in a logical way. The Council recommended that the clustered programmes should each have a profile that matched its function in the system. While important steps have already been taken towards the clustering and profiling of the combined and theoretical learning pathways within VMBO, the proposed clustering of the basic and vocational learning pathways has not materialised, largely due to objections from those in the field that the students on these learning pathways were too different from each other. The Council recommends looking once again at the scope for clustering, involving not only the merging of programmes, but also and above all the creation of a customised provision within the clustered programmes.

Integrate vocational learning pathways in preparatory and upper secondary vocational education

The number of transitions could also be reduced by integrating the vocational learning pathways in preparatory upper secondary vocational education (VMBO) and upper secondary vocational education (MBO). This would enable students to work towards an initial qualification without having to transfer between schools or programmes. This transfer is a stumbling block for vulnerable students, in particular, and carries a high risk of dropout. Experiments have accordingly been under way since 2008 with alternative routes into MBO, in which VMBO and MBO programmes were integrated to create combined 'VM2' learning pathways. These have produced predominantly positive results, though it is important that the results of monitoring are used to improve them.

Introduce more flexibility in the first years of secondary education

It is also important to look for ways of reducing the segregation between school types in the first years of secondary education. The Council calls for greater use of transitional classes and '10-14 education', a kind of education that brings together children aged between 10 and 14 years from the final years of primary school and early years of secondary school, thus softening the hard transition from primary to secondary school and deferring the selection moment to create more scope for differentiation into ability levels. This would introduce greater flexibility in the first years of secondary education, making it easier for students to transfer to a different school type if desirable and possible. This could help break through path-dependency.

Explore the scope for simplifying MBO

Finally, it is important to explore the possibilities for reducing the number of levels of upper secondary vocational education (MBO). The increasingly dynamic labour market and rapidly changing demand call for a critical review of the current range of MBO programmes. The Council questions whether the distinction between levels 3 and 4, for example, is a functional one for the future. A simplified training offer could be more recognisable for potential employers and would also be easier to adapt to changing demand.

Starting point 2: Also create other links between school types and programmes

Bring together different school types at one location or promote collaboration

To reduce the differentiation in Dutch secondary education, the linkage between the different school types needs to be strengthened. This could be achieved by organising several school types at one location or encouraging schools to seek collaboration with other schools. This would make it easier for students to switch from one school type to another and enable schools to fulfil their role as a social training ground more effectively.

Create better linkage between education types

Increased cohesion can also be achieved by periodically reviewing the system as a whole to see whether there is adequate linkage between the different education types, an essential condition for facilitating mobility throughout the system. That linkage should aim at coherence in terms of programme content, curriculum levels and didactic approach. In particular, the Council advocates improving the linkage between VMBO and upper secondary general education (HAVO). The transition between these two education types is a crucial link within the Dutch education system, enabling VMBO students to go on to higher vocational education (HBO) via HAVO, making this an important route to emancipation.

Bridging classes as a structural element in MBO and higher education

Where linkage within programmes is difficult to achieve, bridging classes could offer a way of increasing the scope for students to switch or progress to other programmes. The Council has previously recommended creating a broad-based bridging class at MBO level 2. Students leaving VMBO basic or vocational pathways need a clear idea at a relatively early age of what the various MBO-2 programmes offer and what their interests and future expectations are. This is by no means always the case, and this is one reason for the relatively high dropout from MBO-2 programmes. After dropping out from these programmes, young people in practice have no other option than to try again on a different programme.

The linkage between Bachelor's programmes at universities of applied sciences and university Master's programmes can also be problematic. Several universities offer bridging programmes to smooth out this transition, offering students with a related prior education an efficient means of gaining the knowledge and skills they need to transfer to the Master's programme. The Council recommends exploring the scope to making these bridging programmes a permanent feature of higher education.

Starting point 3: Encourage vocational education in general secondary schools

Another way of improving alignment between different education types is to offer vocational education in all secondary school types. Although the law allows combined learning pathways incorporating secondary general and vocational education, there are virtually no examples of this in the Netherlands. The Council recommends that these combined learning pathways be encouraged. If education in the first years of secondary school, in particular, is structured more flexibly (see starting point 1), there will also be greater scope to offer more vocational subjects within (upper) general secondary (HAVO) and pre-university (VWO) education. This would enable HAVO or VWO students to broaden their development, explore vocational subjects and acquire new skills, making for a smoother transition to vocational education (including from the upper tracks of secondary general education (HAVO-3) to MBO, for example), or putting a decision to go on to academic education on a firmer footing. This would also boost the perceived value of vocational education and skills. The Council also stresses that the route to university via HAVO and VWO must be preserved.

Starting point 4: Reduce and improve selection

The Council recommends that selection be reduced at some transition points in the system and that, where selection does take place, its quality is improved. Selection is used to determine the allocation of students to a particular level and their admission to specific programmes. The Council advocates the use of final tests and national examinations as criteria and minimising the use of supplementary standards and extra tests. Attaining a particular qualification entitles the holder to go on to specific forms of further education; this enables pupils and students to progress through the system in various ways without encountering unnecessary obstacles. This would require good alignment between the content of the different programmes (see starting point 2).

The quality of selection is an important factor that warrants attention. Selection must be predictable and objective and carried out using suitable tools. That is important not just from the perspective of equal opportunities, but also for ensuring that the right pupil or student ends up in the right place. The Council believes attention should be given to the quality of local selection in higher education. The selection procedures commonly include elements such as cognitive skill and knowledge tests, motivational and personality questionnaires and interviews. These can jeopardise the accessibility of higher education or may not be fit for the purpose for which they are used. Their efficiency can also be questioned.

Starting point 5: Make facilities for lifelong learning a structural component of the education system

Lifelong learning, training and development is not just a responsibility of individuals, but also of employers and government. The government has a particular responsibility to provide accessible education for vulnerable groups. To make it easier to combine working and learning throughout life, this provision needs to be a permanent rather than temporary part of the education system. A better post-initial educational infrastructure would contribute to more accessible and affordable training and education. It would also help combat fragmentation in the design and content of courses and create better linkage between educational sectors.

This calls for further exploration of the scope for creating flexibility in the system. This is already happening in upper secondary vocational education and higher vocational education, for example with the MBO certificates pilot, and experiments are also under way to increase flexibility in higher education by offering dual part-time programmes and associate degrees. This creates more scope for customisation and facilitates a better and more timely response to the needs and opportunities of everyone wishing to continue their training or development. The substantive and infrastructural collaboration between state and private education is a valuable part of this and needs to be continued. Sharing each other's knowledge and expertise, locations and teaching materials can be an asset here.

Conclusion

Responsibility for the education system rests with the government. One of its core tasks is to safeguard the coherence of the system when implementing policy. This means regularly considering questions such as 'Which social developments have an impact on education?' and 'What do today's young people and citizens need in general to equip them for the future?'. With the starting points suggested above and the formulation of the social mission of education, the Council is seeking to contribute to a systemic discussion which it believes has made too little progress in recent years.

The full advisory report "Doorgeschoten Differentiatie" and related studies (in Dutch) can be found at <https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/publicaties/2019/doorgeschoten-differentiatie/item7738>