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Foreword

'Europe' figures regularly in discussions about international relations and cooperation. Yet 'Europe' is not an entirely unambiguous concept, and especially when it comes to education. Because while European institutions have no formal powers to involve themselves in education in the Member States, the European influence on education is visibly increasing.

This trend is driven by the governance structure which has evolved around education in Europe over recent decades. For example, EU Member States are increasingly forging intensive and committed partnerships and thereby influencing each other's education and education policy. The European Union also has ambitions in this regard and is taking initiatives in relation to a number of educational themes, as are institutions such as the OECD and UNESCO. The result of these activities is the emergence of a European education policy which has a palpable impact on Dutch education practice.

This report, *Active in Europe*, is not the first to be published on this topic by the Dutch Education Council; the Council first published a report on the influence of Europe on Dutch education almost twenty years ago, in which it recommended that 'Europe' be made a permanent item on the national education agenda. The Council notes that European influence on education has increased further since then, and that education professionals themselves are so active in Europe that the present 'wait-and-see' attitude adopted by the Dutch government is no longer appropriate.

This report, which the Education Council has published on its own initiative, urges Dutch education ministers to engage seriously with European education policy and to work on building a strategic agenda, which is developed in partnership with education professionals and which also takes into account the interaction with related policy domains. A number of key European milestones and decision-making moments in relation to education will occur in the near future and, together with the Dutch presidency of the EU in 2029, these will provide the perfect opportunity for this enhanced approach.

The Education Council notes that 2029 is still regarded in Dutch political and administrative circles as 'a long way off', and that there is an insufficient grasp of the urgent need to start making preparations now. The Council also notes that earlier calls for active engagement with Europe, for example by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), have not been acted upon. In this report, the Education Council therefore stresses that the developments taking place in education in Europe, and the way in which European policy is established, demand timely intervention and structural engagement.

Edith Hooge
Chair

Mirjam van Leeuwen
Secretary-Director

Summary

The Dutch Education Council advises the government to engage seriously with European education policy. The current 'wait-and-see' attitude adopted by the Netherlands fails to acknowledge the increased influence of European education policy and recent developments in Europe. The Council recommends that Dutch education ministers work together with education professionals to develop a strategic agenda which provides clarity on the Dutch ambitions with regard to European education policy. What goals does the Netherlands want to achieve? And how will they contribute to Dutch education? A strategic agenda will provide focus and a guidance framework for both education professionals and government. This will enable the opportunities offered by Europe to be exploited more effectively in Dutch education, enable risks to be monitored and anticipated risks, and enable the Netherlands to help strengthen education in other EU Member States.

Growing influence of Europe in Dutch education

The influence of Europe in Dutch education is increasing. The governance dynamic within the complex and multi-layered context of Europe is leading Member States to forge agreements and take decisions which have a direct impact on education. They include agreements on foreign language teaching, collaboration between education establishments and international exchanges of pupils, students and teachers as part of the drive to achieve a European Education Area. The role of the European Union within that dynamic is steadily increasing, not only through its ambitions and initiatives in relation to education, but also as a result of targets and legislation in related policy domains (economic, social) which impinge on education, for example the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications and internal measures in relation to the freedom of establishment and the free movement of services and workers.

European education policy is now reaching the classroom, laboratory and lecture theatre, partly because of a more active approach to and closer collaboration with Europe on the part of education establishments. This manifests itself most clearly in higher education, though Europe's growing influence can also be seen in senior secondary vocational, primary and secondary education.

Member States and institutions in and around Europe increasingly see education as part of the solution to major challenges such as climate, labour market, technology and digitalisation, migration, the energy transition and the strengthening of constitutional democracy. This has led to an expansion of European education policy, with more money (a doubling of the budget), more knowledge and greater educational ambitions.

The European Union is set to take a series of strategic decisions over the next few years, for example on recalibrating the existing European educational targets, as well as new initiatives in relation to education. The Netherlands assumes the presidency of the European Union in 2029, giving the Dutch government an opportunity to help shape the European education policy agenda. This forthcoming presidency makes it even more important that the Dutch government engages seriously with Europe. What can the Netherlands contribute? And how will that contribution help education in the Netherlands? These and other questions prompted the Dutch Education Council to formulate this advisory report on its own initiative to answer the question of what stance the Dutch government should take in relation to European education policy. The report is aimed at education ministers.

Engage seriously with European education policy

The Education Council recommends that Dutch education ministers engage seriously with European education policy by adopting a proactive approach. The present 'wait-and-see' approach is out of kilter with the more intensive governance dynamic in Europe and the educational ambitions of the EU, which are increasingly impacting on Dutch education. Such a wait-and-see attitude is also out of line with the wishes of stakeholders and education establishments; they need greater clarity regarding the chosen strategy and objectives, so that they are better able to anticipate and prepare for future European education policy. A wait-and-see approach also sits uneasily with the government's systemic responsibility. To be able to fulfil that responsibility, the government needs to have a clear picture of the developments among education professionals and their participation in European education policy, for example exchanges and cooperation, grants and

comparative research. That will bring clarity regarding both the opportunities and risks for the accessibility, efficiency and quality of education.

Create a Dutch strategic agenda for European education policy

Engaging seriously with European education policy starts with a strategic agenda describing the Dutch input and how that input will contribute to Dutch education. There is currently no such agenda. A strategic agenda will provide focus and guidance for both government and education professionals. It will enable better use to be made of the opportunities offered by Europe in relation to education, enable risks to be monitored and anticipated, and help strengthen education in other EU Member States.

The Education Council recommends using a roadmap for drawing up a strategic agenda, covering the period until the Netherlands assumes the EU presidency in 2029 and incorporating the timings of formal decision-making within the EU. These can act as milestones or waypoints, enabling the Dutch input to be thoroughly prepared in partnership with education professionals and parliament. The Council strongly advocates the involvement of education professionals in drawing up a Dutch strategic agenda. This will ensure that the government is aligned with movements and developments already taking place within education, and enable it to exploit the knowledge and experience gained by stakeholders in the field.

The Council also recommends that the objectives set out in the agenda be limited and advocates good coordination between education and related policy domains, such as science policy, youth policy and labour market policy. The Council also recommends that the objectives in the strategic agenda be periodically recalibrated after the Dutch presidency has ended. This will ensure that the agenda remains a valuable assessment framework for the Dutch input in Europe and that it will provide a guideline for the policy of Dutch education establishments.

1 **Background: Education in Europe: more than passive cooperation**

EU Member States are engaging in ever more intensive and more committed agreements and partnerships in order to give direction to education. The European Union also has ambitions and is taking initiatives in a range of educational themes. This European education policy is having a steadily growing influence, including on Dutch education. Its forthcoming EU presidency offers the Netherlands an opportunity to play a crucial role in shaping these developments. What should the Dutch government's stance be in European education policy?

Education is being assigned growing importance in Europe. It is seen as part of the solution to the major challenges facing Europe, such as climate, the labour market, technology and digitalisation, migration, the energy transition and constitutional democracy. These challenges place demands on education in Europe, including in the Netherlands, for example training the necessary skills to achieve a green, sustainable economy and education in democratic citizenship.

The forthcoming Dutch presidency of the EU in 2029 offers the Dutch government an opportunity to play a crucial role in shaping European initiatives and cooperation in education. This prompted the Education Council to publish this advisory report on its own initiative focusing on education and Europe. The report examines how the Dutch government can adopt the most effective stance in European education policy.

From European cooperation on education to European education policy

The status quo in Europe in relation to education has shifted compared with 20 years ago, when the Education Council published its first report on the European education agenda and the Dutch strategy in relation to it.¹ Since then, cooperation on education in and around Europe has increased and become less passive, leading to a steadily growing influence on education.

A key moment in establishing European cooperation on education was the 1999 Bologna Declaration, in which the original 29 European signatories agreed to collaborate on higher education at European level. The goal was (and is) that students and workers should be able to live, study and work anywhere in Europe. The signing of the Declaration in 1999 marked the start of the Bologna Process, entailing ongoing cooperation between European countries and the development of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Bologna Process is still very important for higher education and the convergence of higher education systems in and around Europe. In the Bologna Declaration, Member States commit to voluntarily reforming their higher education systems. This led among other things to greater mobility of students, lecturers and other education professionals, the introduction of a Bachelor/Masters structure, the transferability of course credits, cooperation between education establishments and the promotion of cooperation on quality assurance. The Bologna Process originally arose in the context of the Council of Europe.² Today, the European Union plays a major role, with the European Commission supporting the

¹ ONderwijsraad, 2003 and 2004.

² Not to be confused with the European Union. see Glossary at the end of this report for more details.

participating countries in meeting their obligations under the Bologna Declaration. To date, 48 European countries, as well as the European Commission, have signed up to the Bologna Declaration.

The influence of the EU on education is also growing in other ways. Based on its increasing interest in and ambitions for education, the Union undertakes initiatives in a range of educational themes. These initiatives are developed in the context of the commitment to creating a European Education Area, which was launched by the EU in 2017.³ Member States make agreements on the comparability of qualifications and degrees, on joint efforts to combat premature school dropout, on cooperation between education establishments and on international exchanges of pupils, students and teachers in Europe. EU decisions in other domains, such as energy, digitalisation and employment, also impinge on or influence education.

Crucial role for Member States in European education policy

Since the EU does not itself have competence for education, EU Member States play a crucial role in European education policy. They can agree – both with each other and with institutions in and around Europe⁴ – on goals and priorities for education in those areas where the EU has no competence. It is therefore mainly Member States themselves which determine the direction of education and influence and shape European education policy. There is therefore a role for the Netherlands here, as a Member State. By adopting an active and carefully considered stance in the complex and multi-layered governance context of Europe, the Netherlands can put its own stamp on European education policy. A series of strategic decisions are set to be taken at EU level in the coming years, including a reassessment of the present strategic framework for the European Education Area. As president of the EU in the second half of 2029, the Netherlands has a major role to play here; hence the publication of this report by the Education Council at this time.

European education policy: the result of a governance dynamic

There are wide differences in the degree of competence the European Union has in different policy domains. On monetary policy, for example, the EU takes the lead and Member States are not permitted to formulate their own policy. In some areas, such as agricultural and energy policy, competence is shared between Member States and the EU; in other domains, such as public health, sport and education, the EU is only able to provide support. On education, the European Union does not have exclusive competence. Nonetheless, the complex and multi-layered governance context of Europe undoubtedly has an influence on education in the Member States. Conversely, Member States and European or affiliated institutions influence each other. Member States and institutions in and around Europe enter into mutual administrative relationships, are jointly involved in influencing and governing education and create European education policy together. Moreover, EU Member States and European institutions can reinforce, reform, neutralise or counter each other's governance. All of this can be described as a 'governance dynamic': patterns of relationships and interactions which impinge on education.⁵

Reciprocity and polycentrism key elements of the governance dynamic

The governance dynamic is characterised by reciprocity and polycentrism.⁶ *Reciprocity* in the sense that each EU Member State and each European institution influences the behaviour of other Member States and institutions, while those same Member States and institutions are in turn influenced. An example of reciprocal 'governance' is benchmarking, where EU Member States are able to compare and steer the functioning and performance of various components of each other's education systems. An example is the benchmark of reducing the number of premature school-leavers. Another example is the OECD benchmark Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)⁷, which has a major influence on education policy in individual countries.⁸ As an EU Member State, the Netherlands is also influenced by the adoption of certain policy measures aimed at meeting the various benchmarks.

As well as reciprocity, governance dynamic is also characterised by *polycentrism*, because governance, policy formulation and influence are shared activities where power is divided and

³ See Glossary at the end of this report.

⁴ Apart from EU institutions such as the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, examples include the Council for Europe, UNESCO and the OECD. See Glossary at the end of this report.

⁵ The term 'governance dynamic' is based on the perspective of *governmentality*, which is drawn from the work of Foucault (1998, 1995), Burchell, Gordon & Miller (1991) and Rose (1999). For a more detailed explanation and application of the concept of governance dynamic, see Theisens, Hooge & Waslander, 2016; Waslander, Hooge & Theisens, 2017.

⁶ Olsen, 1988; Klijn, 2008; Pollitt, & Bouckaert, 2011.

⁷ See Glossary at the end of this report.

⁸ Waldow, 2009; Parcerisa, Fontdevila & Verger, 2021.

spread across several parties and institutions. There is thus no single institution, such as the European Union or UNESCO, nor any single Member State, which dominates and holds sway over the rest. Member States and institutions together shape education policy and governance within the European context. Power and countervailing power are held in balance, because no EU Member State or institution has ultimate competence to exert a dominant influence on education.

An example of an outcome of policy and governance dynamic is the European Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning (EQF), which was jointly adopted by EU Member States in 2008. The goal of the EQF is to create clarity regarding qualification standards at European level. All EU Member States have subsequently developed their own national qualifications frameworks: the NLQF in the Netherlands. A bill is currently being prepared which assigns a legal level indication for teaching programmes. This example also shows how the governance dynamic between parties and institutions in and around Europe culminates in European education policy. Another example is the Common European Reference Framework for Languages (CEFR), an international standard which describes language ability in modern foreign languages and is used by European countries as a descriptive tool and reference.

Governance dynamic incorporates harder and softer forms of influence and steering

Where governance and policy are situated in a governance dynamic, as is the case with education in Europe, unilateral attempts to impose binding regulations or frameworks by definition have limited effect. EU Member States and institutions in and around Europe therefore combine 'harder' and 'softer' forms of educational influence and governance in their consultations and cooperation. 'Hard' governance is based on hierarchy, control and legislation; the stricter the legal and regulatory mechanisms for supervision, control and sanctions, the harder the governance that emanates from them.⁹ 'Soft' governance, by contrast, focuses on influencing through persuasion, guidance and advice. It is less coercive and leaves more scope for parties to apply their own meaning and interpretation than the harder governance instruments with their mandatory edicts, prohibitions and financial sanctions.

The distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' forms of influence and governance is not binary, but rather a fluid continuum. The literature distinguishes between four types of governance mechanisms or instruments: (1) legislation and regulation; (2) coordination; (3) funding; and (4) information.⁹ These can be deployed in a harder or softer way,¹⁰ allowing governance and policy to be more or less binding and more or less accompanied by control, accountability or sanctions. Soft governance is not by definition less effective, and sometimes exerts greater influence than hard governance mechanisms.¹¹

A few examples: 'hard' use of legislation and regulation (1) can entail compulsion or prohibition, while 'soft' deployment can mean a covenant or contract. Coordination (2) is hard in the case of the mandatory implementation of a policy intervention, but softer when it involves providing guidelines or frameworks for implementing policy. Funding (3) can be used for hard governance in the form of target funding with accountability, or for softer influence by rewarding good practices or through lump-sum funding with broadly defined objectives. Information (4) can be used as a hard governance mechanism when it involves an explanation of the purpose of an order or prohibition, for example in an explanatory memorandum or law; but information can also be used for softer forms of governance and policy, for example by making knowledge accessible and usable.¹²

One notable example of a governance dynamic that has figured frequently in Europe since the 2000s is the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Here, EU Member States take joint decisions on policy objectives and subsequently evaluate them after preparation in expert meetings and working groups led by the European Commission. Dutch education, for example, and especially vocational and higher education institutions, are indirectly involved in (parts of) this preparation through their networks in Europe. Member States adopt the objectives at their own discretion and transpose them into national policy. Although all Member States usually participate, the cooperation is not binding, and this can lead to policy differentiation.¹³ The term OMC is no longer used, but the agreements aimed at establishing a European Education Area are unchanged.

⁹ The governance dynamic in Europe depends heavily on the willingness of Member States to supply and share relevant data and information (WRR, 2003).

¹⁰ Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014.

¹¹ Brandsen, Boogers & Tops, 2006.

¹² Based on section 2.3 in Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2014.

¹³ Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR), 2003; see also Onderwijsraad, 2003. The use of OMC is declining steadily in the EU; references to OMC peaked in 2014 and have declined since. A search for documents in Eur-Lex using the search string 'education AND OMC' produced 57 documents for 2014, but only five for 2017. See Gornitzka, 2018.

1.1. Intensifying governance dynamic in education

The European governance dynamic in the field of education is intensifying. Member States and institutions in and around Europe are becoming more closely engaged and are more frequently forging cooperation agreements on education. The EU is also becoming more ambitious and taking more initiatives in a number of educational themes. This intensification has increased the importance of European education policy. The amount of funding available for exchange programmes and higher education ambitions has for example doubled in recent decades. The Education Council expects the importance of European education policy to increase further. The more intensive governance dynamic leads to a greater influence on education in the Member States, including the Netherlands. Does this require a shift in the stance taken by the Dutch government?

The governance and policy initiatives in Europe have now extended to the classroom, laboratory and lecture hall. One reason for this is that education establishments have also begun focusing more actively on Europe and forged partnerships. This is most evident in higher education, though there is also a growing focus on the European policy context in senior secondary vocational, primary and secondary education. As highlighted by several examples in this report, this active engagement by Dutch education establishments in Europe is changing Dutch education. However, there is currently no guidance framework from the Dutch government.

A debate has been ongoing in recent years about a possible recalibration of the status quo in the European Union. The Conference on the Future of Europe took place between May 2021 and May 2022, in which dozens of European and national citizen panels put forward recommendations for the future of the European Union. To implement those recommendations, the European Commission has not ruled out treaty amendments to accord more competence to the EU.¹⁴ The European Parliament has even called for this explicitly, though the war in Ukraine has meant that these calls have not found their way to government leaders.¹⁵ A number of recommendations which would require treaty amendment pertain to education, for example the introduction of minimum quality standards, compulsory education in European citizenship, mutual coordination of education programmes and the introduction of a European school qualification in digital skills.¹⁶

1.2. Dutch EU presidency offers opportunities

The Netherlands will assume the presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2029. This will give the Dutch government an opportunity to shape the European governance dynamic in education and to influence the resultant European education policy. Holding the EU presidency will allow the Netherlands to place political topics on the agenda and to play an essential role in steering the decision-making processes.

2029 feels a long way in the future, but European policy processes take a long time and exerting effective influence in Europe demands good preparation at national level. It is therefore vital to start making preparations in good time. A number of key formal decision-making moments will occur in the EU from 2023 onwards; these 'strategic milestones' will influence European education policy. These EU milestones offer the Dutch government a framework for fleshing out and implementing the Dutch preparations for the presidency.

- 2023: an initial evaluation will take place of progress in achieving a European Education Area using the present strategic framework.¹⁷
- 2024: European Parliamentary elections will be held and a new European Commission will take office with a new policy programme.
- 2025: the objectives of the European Education Area will be reassessed based on an evaluation report from the Commission.
- 2027: the existing Erasmus+ programme and the Digital Education Action Plan will both expire. The Erasmus+ programme will begin as part of the Multiannual Financial Framework, with new focus areas and objectives.
- Second half of 2029: the Netherlands assumes the presidency of the European Union. By that time, the existing strategic programme for the European Education Area will almost have run its course and decisions will be taken with a view to the launch of the new programme (2031-2040).

¹⁴ European Commission, 2022c.

¹⁵ European Parliament, 2022.

¹⁶ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022d, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022°.

¹⁷ More information on the European Education Area can be found in the Glossary at the end of this report.

1.3. What should be the Dutch government's stance in European education policy?

European education policy is growing in importance and influence, and the Dutch government can help shape the direction of this development in the years ahead. This prospect prompted the Education Council to publish a report on its own initiative on education and Europe. The report is based on the following question.

What should be the Dutch government's stance in European education policy?

The formulation of this question, focusing on the Dutch stance **in** European education policy, not **in relation to** European education policy, emphasises the fact that European education policy is the result of an increasingly intensive governance dynamic in education in Europe, in which the Member States themselves – together – play a dominant role.¹⁸ This report explores what the Dutch government's stance should be in this context.

Scope

At present, European education policy is mainly relevant in higher education and vocational education and training (senior secondary vocational education). This is partly a result of the original focus of EU policy, which was on training a skilled, mobile European labour force. Preparation for the labour market plays a less prominent role in primary and secondary education, but the broadened scope of European education policy will lead to an increase in European influence in these sectors, too. Accordingly, in this report the Council focuses on all sectors of education.

For whom

In the first instance, this report is aimed at the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education. These ministers share responsibility for education policy, including at European level. Secondly, the report is intended for other cabinet members and Parliament. At European level, education is closely linked to broader socioeconomic and labour market policy, and in this report the Council is therefore also addressing other ministers and parliamentary committees.

Compilation of this report

In compiling this report, the Education Council drew on a number of sources. In addition to scientific literature, Dutch and European policy documents and research reports, the Council consulted experts and stakeholders in the Netherlands and at European institutions, as well as members of the Youth Education Council. A list of literature references and experts consulted can be found at the end of this report. Finally, the Council made grateful use of written contributions received in response to the calls for opinions published on the Council website and social media outlets.

¹⁸ See also Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2021.

2 **Advice: The government must engage seriously with European education policy**

The Education Council advises the government to engage seriously with European education policy by adopting a proactive stance. The present ‘wait-and-see’ approach by the Netherlands fails to acknowledge the increased influence of European education policy and recent developments in Europe.

Education is increasingly viewed in Europe as part of the solution to a large number of challenges such as climate, labour market, technology and digitalisation, migration, the energy transition and reinforcing constitutional democracy. This is leading to an intensification of European education policy, with growing European ambitions and initiatives which impact on education in the Member States, including the Netherlands. With the Dutch presidency of the EU on the horizon, the Council advises the government to engage seriously with European education policy. It can do this by adopting a proactive stance, taking into account the opportunities and risks of European education policy for Dutch education and the opportunities to contribute to that policy. The Dutch stance on European (education) policy has been on the agenda for some time; this report follows the line set out by the Education Council in its reports from 2003, 2004 and 2016.¹⁹ In 2004 the Council highlighted the growing influence of Europe on Dutch education, and advised the government to adopt a proactive stance in European education policy and the associated decision-making. In 2016 the Education Council called on the government to develop a comprehensive strategic view on internationalisation of education. The present report, *Active in Europe*, builds on those reports and underlines the urgency of engaging seriously with European education policy now. This demands a proactive stance by the Dutch government.

Broad call for proactive stance by the Dutch government

The Education Council is not the only advisory body calling on the Dutch government to take a different stance in Europe. The Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) recently advised the government to adopt ‘a new compass’ in European industrial politics.²⁰ The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) expressed the expectation that the Netherlands would adopt a more constructive and consistent position in Europe.²¹ And the Social and Economic Council (SER) urged the Dutch government to give new impetus to the European project.²²

This report is also in line with the observations from the evaluation of Dutch EU policy, published by the International Research and Policy Evaluation Directorate at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²³ In that evaluation, the Directorate notes that developments at European level have become more dynamic and complex and that the Dutch system of coordination and strategy-building has not been adapted to keep pace. The Directorate argues that the government needs to invest in civil service capacity and knowledge in order to be able to operate strategically in Europe.

Structure of this report

In this chapter the Education Council fleshes out its advice to the government to engage seriously with European education policy. The Council believes the Dutch approach is too heavily focused on ‘wait-and-see’ and is not appropriate (section 2.1) given the increased influence of European education policy (section 2.2). Cooperation in the European Union in

¹⁹ Onderwijsraad, 2003, 2004 en 2016.

²⁰ Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, 2022.

²¹ Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2021.

²² Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2019.

²³ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2021.

related policy domains has intensified as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis, the energy transition, technology and digitalisation and increased migration. This intensification underlines the importance of a proactive approach by the government (section 2.3). A ‘wait-and-see’ approach is also out of line with the more intensive European governance dynamic in education (chapter 1). Moreover, education professionals and institutions are already engaging fully with European education policy. Their need for guidance frameworks (section 2.4) also demands a proactive stance by the government.

In chapter 3, the Council puts forward a number of building blocks for fleshing out the recommendation to develop a strategic agenda for European education policy.

2.1. The present Dutch approach is no longer appropriate

The ‘wait-and-see’ approach adopted by the Dutch government fails to acknowledge the Netherlands’ reputation as an effectively operating Member State in many other European policy domains. It is moreover no longer appropriate in the light of recent and likely future developments in Europe. Those developments demand an active stance which contributes to European education policy and exploits the opportunities it offers for establishing a more cohesive policy, and also demand a greater awareness and knowledge of the governance dynamic in Europe in relation to education.

Dutch approach too passive

With its passive attitude, the Dutch government is failing to make the most of its status as a Member State of the EU and runs the risk of missing out on European opportunities and resources. Cooperation with other Member States and European institutions has much to offer, for example in improving education, linking education to the (regional) labour market and making professional qualifications transferable. There is extensive knowledge in Europe on topics such as sustainability, digitalisation and lifelong development. The amount of money available from the EU for Dutch education also argues against a passive approach. On top of this, the Netherlands itself has a major contribution to make, for example by actively supporting developments in education and education policy in other Member States. The Education Council regards Dutch senior secondary vocational education in particular as an enlightening example for other Member States, with features such as combined work-study programmes and collaboration with the professions and the business community. The Education Council believes a Dutch approach is needed which takes into account the opportunities and risks of European education policy and is alert to the opportunities to contribute to that policy.²⁴

The present wait-and-see approach by the Dutch government in the EU is largely rooted in the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.²⁵ A strict interpretation of these principles is no longer fit for purpose in the light of the development of European education policy and the major influence it exerts. The complex and multi-layered European governance dynamic in education – in which both Member States and the EU and its institutions have ambitions and are taking initiatives – demands a strategic approach from the government. The governance, influence and policy which ensue from the European governance dynamic also demand a strategic approach that makes it possible to respond to these developments, flex with them and help shape them.

Awareness and knowledge of the European governance dynamic in education and of the influence, governance and policy that stem from it, are essential in order to be able to adopt such a proactive stance. Moreover, the forthcoming Dutch EU presidency means the Netherlands will be expected to take the lead and coordinate the policy initiatives and activities. Only a proactive approach will enable the Dutch government to contribute to European initiatives and to evaluate them in a properly considered and coherent way. The Education Council accordingly regards the recent statements by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science suggesting a more open approach to European developments in education and research as a positive step.²⁶

²⁴ See also Denktank Coronacrisis, 2020.

²⁵ See the Glossary at the end of this report for an explanation of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

²⁶ See e.g. the lecture delivered by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science at the symposium on *‘The future of European cooperation in education, research and innovation’*, which was organised by Nether and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science on 18 May 2022.

Dutch approach rooted mainly in principles of subsidiarity and proportionality

The Education Council notes the passive stance taken by the Dutch government in the EU with regard to European education policy. An active approach will follow only once the government sees clear added value in the proposed EU policy, which moreover aligns with national developments in education policy, with the (characteristically Dutch) freedom of education and with the relatively high degree of policy and decision-making freedom traditionally enjoyed by Dutch education establishments.²⁷

This passive approach is evident among other things from the government's response to new proposals by the European Commission. That response is expressed among other things in 'BNC documents', which essentially summarise new proposals from the European Commission and their consequences for Dutch education. They also describe the envisaged Dutch stance in response to the proposed policy and are intended among other things to inform Parliament about the standpoints that the Dutch government will adopt in Brussels. In these documents, the government generally takes the role of assessor of proposed education policy, rarely as a co-designer and co-owner of that policy. Reference is made in only a limited number of passages to proactive Dutch input during the establishment of the European Commission proposal concerned. The main focus is generally on the supporting role of the European Commission and the great importance of the autonomy of education establishments. Government considerations in assessing whether a proposed European policy fits in with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality are a recurrent theme in every BNC document. The documents also state whether the proposal fits with the national educational priorities. If so, the government incorporates the proposal in existing national policy, with explicit reference to the autonomy of schools and other education institutions and the voluntary nature of European policy. The government rarely expresses a pronounced negative response to European education policy. In the case of both positive and negative assessments, the government regularly poses questions to the Commission and proposes that the envisaged policy be incorporated within existing European programmes.

Lack of an explicit and cohesive strategic vision on European education policy

There is currently no explicit and cohesive Dutch strategic vision for European education policy. The section on the European Union in the Rutte IV government Coalition Agreement, for example, makes no mention of education at all. Similarly, the section on education makes no mention of the European Union. The government responds to the evaluation of Dutch policy on Europe by the International Research and Policy Evaluation Directorate²⁸ by referring to the annual policy brief, *State of the European Union*, as a key guiding instrument.²⁹ But with regard to education, the *State of the Union* mainly summarises which topics have been dealt with and which have yet to be dealt with.³⁰ It does not set out a clear strategic vision on European education policy. Such a vision is also unlikely in the forthcoming Europe Act³¹, which is intended mainly to improve the supply of information about EU policy.

The Education Council believes there is a link between the lack of an explicit and cohesive vision and the present passive stance adopted by the Dutch government. As education is a national matter in which the EU has no formal competence, it may seem that the Dutch government is not in a position to formulate a cohesive view on European education policy, or does not see a need to do so. The Council does not agree with this, and would refer to the intensive governance dynamic around education which exists in Europe and from which European education policy emanates. The Council believes there is an urgent need to develop a cohesive vision on how the Netherlands should position itself within that governance dynamic between Member States and European or affiliated institutions. This will enable the Netherlands to help shape European education policy and to assess proposals systematically.³²

2.2. Stronger focus on education by the European Union

The Education Council notes that the European Union is itself also focusing more on education. Up to the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the influence of the EU on

²⁷ Onderwijsraad, 2019b.

²⁸ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2021.

²⁹ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022a.

³⁰ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022b.

³¹ Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022c.

³² See also the conclusions in Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2021.

education was mainly confined to rulings by the Court of Justice of the European Communities. Some of those rulings related to education, specifically those dealing with equal treatment of students wishing to study in another Member State.³³ Since the Treaty of Maastricht, however, education has formed part of the cooperation between Member States. The present Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)³⁴ call for a balanced approach incorporating contributing to support for education combined with reticence with regard to education. Article 165 of the TFEU states that the Union 'shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action', whilst at the same time 'fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity'. Article 166 of the TFEU contains similar provisions for vocational education and training.

Since then, European education policy has begun responding to the need from the world of work for international agreements. European cooperation on education has developed through agreements made by government leaders in Lisbon and Bologna (higher education) and Copenhagen and Osnabrück (vocational education).³⁵ This has led to an intensification of international cooperation. Although the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union sets clear limits on the competence of the Union in education, it is no longer possible to read the provisions of the Treaty without including the extensive list of decisions, recommendations and conclusions by the Council of the European Union (in this case education ministers of the Member States). This gives rise to a picture of European education policy which extends to virtually every sector of education and which covers a large number of themes.

Scope of European education policy increasing

The scope of European education policy has expanded over recent decades. Originally, European cooperation focused mainly on senior vocational and higher education. At the start of this century the chief aim was to contribute to a strong, mobile European labour force. Today, the input is much broader; the policy now incorporates initiatives in areas ranging from preschool and early childhood education up to and including lifelong development. The policy also no longer focuses solely on the European labour and services market, but also on social inclusion, equality of opportunity, the energy transition and digital literacy. The Europe 2020 Strategy,³⁶ which built on the Lisbon Strategy, was aimed at a more knowledge-intensive European economy, sustainability and inclusion through education, knowledge and innovation. In 2016, the EU concluded that education and the labour market were not well matched, and drafted the (New) European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience³⁷ in order to reinforce the quality and relevance of learned skills. Education also has a place in the European social rights pillar from 2017, for example in the right to equal treatment and opportunities in education. Since the Commission led by Ursula Von der Leyen took office, and following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, retraining and reskilling the labour force has once again become a priority in European policy. The European Skills Agenda and the 2020 Osnabrück Declaration by EU education ministers call for high-quality education to aid sustainability, digitalisation, lifelong learning, the energy transition and international mobility.

The examples in the panel below show how European education policy influences education practice.

Recognition of academic and professional qualifications

The European Commission issued a Directive in 2005 on mutual recognition of qualifications for regulated professions.³⁸ This makes it easier for persons from one Member State to practise a regulated profession in another Member State. The Directive also had some significance for education: minimum qualification standards applied for a number of professions, so that these qualifications could be automatically recognised. This applied for doctors, nurses, dental practitioners, veterinary surgeons, midwives, pharmacists and architects. If the training programmes concerned do not meet the minimum qualification standards, graduates cannot automatically practise that profession in a different Member State.

³³ ECJ 3 July 1974, C-9/47, ECLI:EU:C:1974:74 (*Casagrande*).

³⁴ See Glossary at the end of this report.

³⁵ More information on Lisbon and Bologna (higher education) and Copenhagen and Osnabrück (vocational education) can be found in the Glossary at the end of this report.

³⁶ European Commission, 2010.

³⁷ See Glossary at the end of this report.

³⁸ Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications.

Language teaching

Modern language teaching is influenced by Europe in several ways. In 1995, the European Commission expressed the wish that every young person in Europe should learn two European languages in addition to their mother tongue. Partly at the request of the European Commission, in 2005 the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science launched the Dutch Activity Programme for Modern Foreign Languages.³⁹ Since 2007, all Dutch pre-university students are examined in at least one foreign language in addition to English. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), developed by the Council of Europe⁴⁰ in 2001, is now also embedded in Dutch education, and recently the government decided to assign a formal place to the Framework in attainment targets and examination programmes.⁴¹

Entrepreneurship Competence Framework

In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union cited 'initiative and entrepreneurship' as one of the core competencies for lifelong learning.⁴² Based on this, in 2016 the European Commission developed the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, or EntreComp, in order to improve and promote entrepreneurship among European citizens and organisations. EntreComp has now also found its way into Dutch education and, along with the methods and instruments based upon it, is increasingly used to design entrepreneurship teaching, for example in secondary and vocational education.

Breadth of European education policy increasing

The amount of European policy is increasing. This is evident from the increased volumes of money, knowledge, ambition and education programmes. Education is seen as a tool for achieving the broader aims of the European Union. This is also clear from the position occupied by education in various European funds, which are not themselves specifically geared to education. For example, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) supports the social policy of Member States, especially in relation to employment, education and social development. The Dutch government has opted to deploy a portion of the ESF+-funding to help vulnerable persons access the labour market, including pupils in practical education and special secondary education. Another example of EU funds that can be used in Dutch education is the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which is primarily intended for socioeconomic development at regional level and at reducing the differentials between European regions. The priority of the ERDF is on developing a 'smarter' and 'greener' Europe. Education establishments can make use of these grants, for example to strengthen the cooperation with industry or to make school buildings more sustainable.

More money available for cooperation and exchange

The expansion of EU policy manifests itself chiefly in the increased amount of money available. The budget for cooperation and exchanges, for example, has almost doubled.

Erasmus+ is the European Union's biggest and best-known umbrella programme for education and training. The programme was launched in 2014 by bringing together a number of existing EU cooperation and exchange programmes, such as Erasmus, Comenius and Leonardo. The importance of Erasmus+ is growing, as evidenced by the growth in financial resources: the total budget for Erasmus+ for 2021-2027 has almost doubled compared with the period 2014-2020 (see Figure 1).⁴³ The Erasmus+ programme not only funds student and teacher exchanges, but also cross-border cooperation between education establishments, as well as supporting policy development and cooperation between Member States. The funding made available under Erasmus+ 2021-2027 also supports the European Universities Initiative and the Centres of Vocational Excellence.⁴⁴

³⁹ See also Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2008.

⁴⁰ See Glossary at the end of this report.

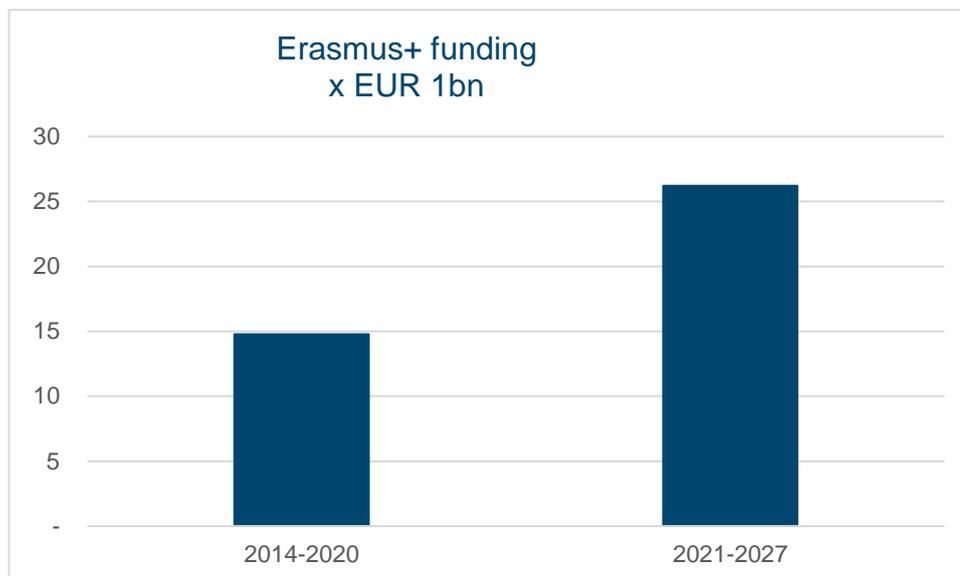
⁴¹ Fasoglio, Moonen & Tammenga, 2022.

⁴² European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2006.

⁴³ See <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/erasmus-2021-2027-programme-brings-over-eu262-billion-to-support-mobility-and-cooperation-0>

⁴⁴ See Glossary at the end of this report.

Figure 1:
Erasmus+
financial
resources
(x EUR
1bn)



Source: European Commission.⁴⁵

Growing importance of knowledge-gathering and sharing

The expansion of European education policy is also evident from the dissemination of knowledge across Europe. Knowledge-gathering and sharing are becoming increasingly important in achieving common EU education goals.

EU Member States all have their own education systems, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. This offers opportunities to learn from experiences and solutions in other Member States for challenges also faced by the Netherlands, and vice versa. The European Commission plays a key role in that reciprocal learning process by formulating ambitions and gathering and sharing knowledge. Those ambitions are translated into benchmarks with targets to which the Member States jointly commit, and on which they report annually. The progress of Member States against the benchmarks is monitored by the Commission. This gives rise in the European educational context to an ever-expanding knowledge base (research, data gathering and statistics).

One way in which the European Commission shares knowledge is through Eurydice. This is an online catalogue which describes and compares European education systems.⁴⁶ Eurydice also incorporates many country comparisons, for example the structure of mathematics teaching in different Member States.⁴⁷ This makes Eurydice a large and important source of information on how different countries approach comparable challenges.

Other European institutions also play a role in knowledge gathering and sharing. An example is the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop),⁴⁸ which gathers knowledge, analyses data and facilitates the exchange of knowledge between Member States and other actors in the Union. Finally, there are large-scale international and EU-overarching comparative studies of students (PISA) and teachers (TALIS), which are carried out under the aegis of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁴⁹ The results of these comparative studies play an important role in the evaluation and development of European education policy.⁵⁰

Expert groups are another important source of knowledge for the preparation of education policy by the European Commission.⁵¹ Their main function is to provide insights into educational practice in the Member States. Experts can apply to participate in an expert group, and the European Commission can itself also invite experts and stakeholders. The

⁴⁵ See <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/erasmus-2021-2027-programme-brings-over-eu262-billion-to-support-mobility-and-cooperation-0>

⁴⁶ See <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/>

⁴⁷ See also European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022a.

⁴⁸ See Glossary at the back of this report.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See e.g. European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022b.

⁵¹ Akse, 2020.

Commission convenes the meetings, draws up the agenda, sets goals and is thus able to shape the incoming information flows.⁵²

Educational ambitions expanded to early-childhood and primary education

European education policy not only encompasses more money and knowledge, but also harbours greater ambitions than in the past.

The strategic frameworks (agendas) which are adopted by the EU every ten years also set out goals for European education policy. The European ambitions are translated into benchmarks with targets to which the Member States jointly commit; these are known as EU-level targets.⁵³ These are not policy objectives that each Member State has to achieve, but rather agreements whereby Member States make joint efforts to achieve goals at EU level. The benchmarks are therefore an important part of European education policy, indicating which policy topics and goals are important and giving Member States information relative to other countries. The benchmarks thus incentivise countries to take action.

Previously, the emphasis in the benchmarks was on improving the match between education and the labour market, for increasing the number of academic graduates, reducing premature school dropout and improving lifelong development. The goal in the most recent EU strategic framework is to contribute through better cooperation in education to social and economic growth, the green transition and the digital transition. This ambition has been translated into targets for 2025 and 2030, and these also target primary education and early-childhood and preschool education.⁵⁴ One of the targets for 2030, for example, is that at least 96% of children aged between three years and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in preschool and early-childhood education and reception.

2.3. Growing European cooperation in other domains also has consequences for education

The cooperation between EU Member States has increased in recent years in a number of policy domains that are obliquely related to education. The Education Council expects this cooperation to increase further and therefore also to influence European education policy. The objectives in the European Education Area are closely related to the European objectives in the economic and social domains. The intensifying EU cooperation in these policy domains underlines yet again the importance of a proactive stance by the Netherlands.

Recent international developments strengthen EU cooperation

Recent international developments, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis, the energy transition, technology and digitalisation and increased migration have prompted EU Member States to cooperate more intensively. In response to the global Covid-19 pandemic, for example, Member States opted for a joint EU vaccination strategy in order to speed up the development, production and roll-out of a Covid vaccine.⁵⁵ The EU also put on a united front by imposing (new) sanctions on Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁶ Member States also adopted a joint European Climate Act as part of the European Green Deal to combat climate change.⁵⁷ In its Coalition Agreement, the Dutch government stated that it wishes to play a leading role in making the Union more competitive, economically stronger, greener and safer.⁵⁸

Recent international developments which strengthen EU cooperation also have consequences for education. Take technology and digitalisation, for example: the digital transformation has radically changed society and is having an ever greater impact on daily life. The influence of large corporations in this area raises international questions. Organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe are discussing the

⁵² There are currently 19 expert groups active for the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 14 of which are directly concerned with education.

⁵³ Council of the European Union, 2021a.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/public-health/eu-vaccines-strategy_nl

⁵⁶ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/nl/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>

⁵⁷ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/nl/press/press-releases/2021/06/28/council-adopts-european-climate-law/>

⁵⁸ Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2022.

consequences of this for education. In response to this, the European Union has taken a number of measures in relation to European digital services, digital markets, digital identity, data strategy, artificial intelligence and digital skills.⁵⁹

More European cooperation also influences European education policy, as the two panels below illustrate.

Education for refugees from Ukraine

In response to the war in Ukraine, EU Member states, both individually and jointly, did their best to accommodate Ukrainian refugees, including in the education system. Young Ukrainians were brought into the national education systems, where among other things they received language lessons.⁶⁰ At EU level, a number of working groups were mobilised to share particular experiences and good examples.⁶¹

The role of education in the European Green Deal

In the proposals put forward by the European Commission on fleshing out the Green Deal, education plays a role in achieving the EU climate objectives.⁶² For example, the European Parliament calls for the development of curricula within the European Universities Initiative and the Centres of Vocational Excellence focusing on sustainability.⁶³ The European Skills Agenda, aimed at the development of (vocational) skills within the EU, and the European Social Fund Plus for employment, education and social development, also emphasise the skills needed to achieve the EU climate objectives.⁶⁴ Finally, there are proposals to make student mobility more sustainable, for example by encouraging the use of trains rather than aeroplanes for exchanges.⁶⁵

Other policy domains also influence education

Dutch education is also influenced by other European policy domains. In the European Semester,⁶⁶ Member States are informed of the points where education policy needs to be adjusted in order to achieve economic and social objectives. The European strategic framework for education, the European Education Area, also states the ambition of bringing educational objectives more closely into line with the overarching priorities of the EU.⁶⁷

European policy on digitalisation has major consequences for education. The EU approach to digital skills is set out in the EU Action Plan for Digital Education, in which the EU offers support for education and training in EU Member States in adapting to the digital age.⁶⁸

Other policy domains that are linked to education include European labour market policy and European research and innovation policy. Section 2.2 explained how the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications had direct consequences for various training programmes, with minimum standards being set for training programmes for a number of medical professions, for example, so that these qualifications could subsequently be automatically recognised. Apart from the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications, other developments on the labour market also impinge on education, for example the European Skills Agenda which aims to strengthen the quality and relevance of learned skills, and the policy on lifelong learning in which education and labour market come together. Dutch universities relatively often receive European research grants,⁶⁹ as a result, researchers with particular expertise are appointed at these universities, who also deliver teaching. As a consequence, receiving – or not receiving – EU funding for scientific research also influences academic education.

Decisions by the EU in areas far removed from education can still impinge on or influence education. A striking example is the provision of school milk and fruit in primary and secondary schools (see panel below).

⁵⁹ See https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age_nl

⁶⁰ See also Onderwijsraad, 2022a.

⁶¹ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2022b.

⁶² See <https://education.ec.europa.eu/nl/focus-topics/green-education/learning-for-the-green-transition>

⁶³ European Parliament, 2020.

⁶⁴ European Commission, 2016.

⁶⁵ See <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/priorities-2019-2024/a-european-green-deal>

⁶⁶ See Glossary at the end of this report.

⁶⁷ Council of the European Union, 2021b.

⁶⁸ European Commission, 2020; see also Onderwijsraad, 2022b for the consequences for education of the use of smart technology.

⁶⁹ Of the 408 European Research Council Starting Grants, 40 have gone to Dutch research institutes this year, putting the Netherlands in the top three best performing countries. See <https://www.neth-er.eu/onderzoek/nederland-in-top-drie-erc-starting-grants>

European Common Agricultural Policy in the classroom

Dutch schools are able to make use of the European scheme for school milk and fruit. Under this scheme, primary and special secondary school pupils receive three pieces of fruit or vegetables each week for 20 weeks, on the condition that the schools implement supportive educational measures. The aim is to teach pupils about healthy eating habits, local food chains and organic and sustainable production, in a bid to combat food waste. The European Union also provides financial support to related activities aimed at bringing pupils closer to agriculture, such as tasting classes, a vegetable garden and farm visits. Notwithstanding the educational character of this scheme, it is actually a spin-off of the EU agricultural policy.⁷⁰

Enforceable EU regulations influence education

It is worth emphasising here that the EU directly impacts on education in the Netherlands not only via the European governance dynamic, but also via legislation. This goes back to 1968, with the Regulation on the free movement of workers, when children of migrating workers acquired the right to receive education in the host Member State.⁷¹ In the 2004 report 'Education and Europe: European influences in the Netherlands' (*Onderwijs en Europa: Europese invloeden in Nederland*), the Education Council described how EU regulations in other policy domains influence education in EU Member States, for example because they also apply to education establishments. These may be sector-specific regulations which have direct consequences for the national education system. There are also a number of general provisions and principles of EU law which influence the national education system, for example the non-discrimination principle which assures equal access to education in Member States for EU citizens, the EU regulations on the protection of personal data and the EU regulations on the internal market which impinge on education, such as the recognition of qualifications needed to practise certain professions.⁷²

European students in the lecture hall

The number of international students in the Netherlands has increased over the last 15 years by 500% at universities and 60% at universities of applied sciences.⁷³ Most of these students come from Europe: EU treaties ensure that students from other Member States have the same rights as Dutch students. The perceived high quality of Dutch education, the extensive use of English-language teaching and the active recruitment by Dutch higher education institutes at international education fairs all combine to make the Netherlands an attractive destination for international students – too attractive, according to some Dutch universities; for example, the University of Amsterdam and Delft University of Technology have long called for statutory measures to limit the number of international students.⁷⁴

To this day, EU regulations governing the internal market, and in particular the freedom of establishment and the free movement of services and workers, influence education in the Member States. The question of the relationship between national education legislation and regulations and the higher EU law is always relevant here. For example, the Court of Justice of the EU ruled that Hungary's higher education legislation, which set a series of conditions for foreign higher education institutes, was in conflict with the freedom of establishment, the free movement of services and the provisions of the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The Court also ruled that the Hungarian legislation infringed the principle of academic freedom and the freedom to establish higher education institutions as set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.⁷⁵

2.4. Need for frameworks

European influence on Dutch education has now reached as far as teaching practice in schools and colleges. This is partly due to the more active engagement with Europe by education institutions and the forging of cooperation agreements. This is most evident in higher education, but the influence of European education policy in senior secondary vocational, primary and secondary education is also growing visibly. The present passive stance by the Dutch government no longer aligns with the wishes of education

⁷⁰ Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2017/40 of 3 November 2016 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council with regard to Union aid for the supply of fruit and vegetables, bananas and milk in educational establishments and amending Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 907/2014. PbEU 2017, L 5/11.

⁷¹ Regulation (EEC) No 1612/68 of the Council of 15 October 1968 on freedom of movement for workers within the Community, Official Journal of the European Union 1968, L 257.

⁷² Onderwijsraad, 2004.

⁷³ See <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2022/11/kamer-eist-voorlopige-stop-op-internationale-werving-van-studenten/>

⁷⁴ See <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2022/09/als-de-uva-een-quotum-instelt-voor-buitenlandse-studenten-grijpt-de-inspectie-in/>

⁷⁵ CJEU 5 March 2020, C-66/18, ECLI:EU:C:2020:792 (*Commission v. Hungary*).

professionals and institutions. The interviews by the Education Council revealed a need for greater clarity on the strategy and objectives, so that the education sector is better equipped to anticipate future developments in European education policy by the Dutch government.

Higher education institutes make intensive use of the opportunities and funding offered by the EU, and enthusiastically took up the European Universities Initiative. Three Dutch universities of applied sciences and eleven universities are now involved in one of the European alliances. The alliances are in different phases of development and have different focus areas, but a number of them are in the lead. The Dutch government follows at a distance when it comes to offering frameworks and funding. Initially, the government was reticent in its assessment of the European Universities Initiative.⁷⁶ According to the Minister at the time, it was undesirable to create an entirely new institutional network of European universities and universities of applied sciences.⁷⁷ Since then, the Dutch government has come to recognise the importance of European cooperation between higher education institutions, and now actively supports the European Universities Initiative.⁷⁸ The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recently announced extra funding for participating higher education institutions to support the shared ambitions of the alliances.⁷⁹ However, there is a lack of clear objectives and a clear framework to support the developments that have been set in train.

Goals of European Universities Initiative still unclear

The efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science appear to be directed principally towards identifying issues and removing obstacles to forming an alliance.⁸⁰ One of the issues is that the quality assurance system for joint programmes (accreditation) does not function properly. Accreditation of cross-border programmes has been possible since 2015 through the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA), operated by the designated accreditation bodies of the Member States concerned. However, the EA is not yet fully applicable to higher education institutions in some partner countries, necessitating a different organisation of the joint programmes. Another issue is the way in which the Netherlands assesses the 'micro-efficiency' of a new programme. This assessment process is insufficiently integrated with the accreditation procedure and requires the education institution to estimate the labour market need from the joint programme. In practice, this proves difficult.

Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, education institutions have fundamental questions about the nature and goals of the European Universities Initiative. Where does the Initiative lead, precisely what is a 'European University', and what does the Initiative mean for education establishments which decide not to take part in an alliance? A strategy is needed, because the European Commission has announced two pilots for the further formalisation of the European University. The first pilot involves testing and facilitating a European qualification label, while the second focuses on the ability to experiment with instruments to achieve a legal status for European alliances of higher education institutions.

European education policy is also being developed in the vocational education sector. In the Osnabrück Declaration, European education ministers and the social partners, representing employers and employees, endorsed the importance of vocational education for the recovery following the Covid crisis, the further development of the European Education Area, support for the major transitions and the contribution that vocational education can make to the European Union's competitiveness and labour market. Vocational training institutes stress the importance of their sector in finding solutions to major societal challenges, which increasingly have a cross-border, European character.

Vocational education and training in the Netherlands (MBO) is highly regarded internationally, partly thanks to the predominantly dual-track nature of the programmes, combining work and study, and the involvement of the professions/industry and social partners. Vocational education and training can help provide solutions to the changing demand for labour as a result of the major transitions facing the European Union. Vocational training institutes are already heavily engaged in European cooperation, for

⁷⁶ European Universities are transnational alliances of higher education institutions with a shared long-term strategy, which promote European values and a European identity and which together provide teaching on global challenges such as climate change, health and sustainability. The idea for the initiative arose at the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2017, after President Emmanuel Macron had called in his Sorbonne lecture earlier that year for far-reaching cooperation between European higher education institutions.

⁷⁷ See <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2018/05/netwerk-van-europese-universiteiten/>

⁷⁸ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2018; Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022f.

⁷⁹ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2022a.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

example through active involvement in the creation of Centres of Vocational Excellence. As yet, however, there is a lack of clear objectives and frameworks for this.

Vocational students also need clear frameworks. People with technical skills are increasingly valued in Europe due to the major transitions; the labour market for such people is 'Europeanising'. Both institutions and government encourage international mobility for vocational students. Stressing the importance of developing international competences.⁸¹ Yet there is a gulf between the lofty ambitions – 'everyone' on an exchange – and the actual number of vocational students gaining international experience. In higher education, Erasmus exchanges are common; around 17,000 Dutch students follow education at a foreign university or university of applied sciences each year.⁸² By contrast, the number of vocational students participating is substantially lower.⁸³ That is partly due to the relatively young age of vocational students and their limited international focus; however, a further reason is the (in)ability to recognise qualifications from other Member States. To achieve its ambitions, the government needs to make clear choices on aspects such as recognition of qualifications.

Vocational students make less use of EU exchange programmes

Although European exchanges for vocational students are seen as increasingly important, Dutch vocational students make less use of EU exchange programmes and grants than students in higher education. The number of persons (students and staff) from vocational training institutes who participate in exchanges through Erasmus+ is barely more than a third of the number of participants from higher education. The budget made available for vocational education and training by Nuffic, which acts as the National Erasmus+ Agency, is accordingly lower than for higher education institutes. European exchanges are moreover less accessible for vocational students, often due to a lack of recognition of qualifications attained abroad. Employers do not always know the precise value of the qualifications held by international applicants, and it is therefore harder for vocational students to use the course credits they have obtained towards their final qualification.

⁸¹ Onderwijsraad, 2016.

⁸² Figures from 2017. See <https://www.ocwincijfers.nl/sectoren/onderwijs-algemeen/leerlingen-en-studenten/internationale-mobiliteit-van-leerlingen-en-studenten>

⁸³ Nuffic, 2020.

3 Recommendation: Develop a Dutch strategic agenda for European education policy

The Education Council recommends that education ministers draw up a Dutch strategic agenda for European education policy. This will enable the Netherlands to make better use of European education policy and help to strengthen education and education policy in other EU Member States.

In chapter 2, the Education Council advised the Dutch government to engage seriously with European education policy by adopting a proactive stance. The Council believes that this begins with drawing up a strategic agenda by education ministers, who have primary responsibility for European education policy. The Council believes that such an agenda is an absolute necessity, because the present passive 'wait-and-see' approach by the government, rooted mainly on the principle of subsidiarity, is not appropriate given the current developments in European education policy, and also fails to take into account the governance dynamic in Brussels (and Strasbourg).

A strategic agenda should describe the Dutch input and how it contributes to Dutch primary and secondary education, senior secondary vocational education and higher education. The agenda would provide focus and guidance to both government and education professionals and institutions on how to operate within Europe. This would in turn enable Dutch education to make better use of the possibilities offered by Europe and to monitor and anticipate risks, whilst also enabling the Netherlands to help strengthen education in other EU Member States.

In this chapter, the Council offers building blocks for a Dutch strategic agenda. It is up to education ministers to flesh out the content of the agenda from three perspectives: (1) political reference points; (2) input by and involvement of the education sector; and (3) 'momentum' and substantive themes which arise in Brussels. The Education Council stresses the importance of maintaining a strategic agenda for European education policy after the Dutch presidency of the EU, and of reassessing the objectives and content at regular intervals.

3.1. Draw up a roadmap to the EU presidency

The Education Council recommends that in formulating a Dutch strategic agenda, the government should draw up a roadmap for the period up to the Dutch EU presidency in 2029, incorporating the moments at which formal decisions are taken in the EU. These moments can serve as milestones or waypoints, so that the Dutch contribution can be prepared carefully and in collaboration with the education sector and Parliament.

The EU's strategic framework for education, the European Education Area, expires in 2030. A new framework, which will apply from 2031, will be developed in the run-up to that year. European education programmes build on each other and are periodically evaluated and recalibrated. Moreover, the preparation of policy and decision-making in the Council of the European Union is linked to specific periods and formal decision-making moments. A Dutch strategic agenda for European education policy should take into account the moments at which these formal decisions are taken or prepared in the EU. These moments will serve as milestones or waypoints to help in the preparation of the Dutch input (in collaboration with the education sector and Parliament). A timely standpoint definition will strengthen the Netherlands' negotiating position, because the Netherlands will then be able to coordinate

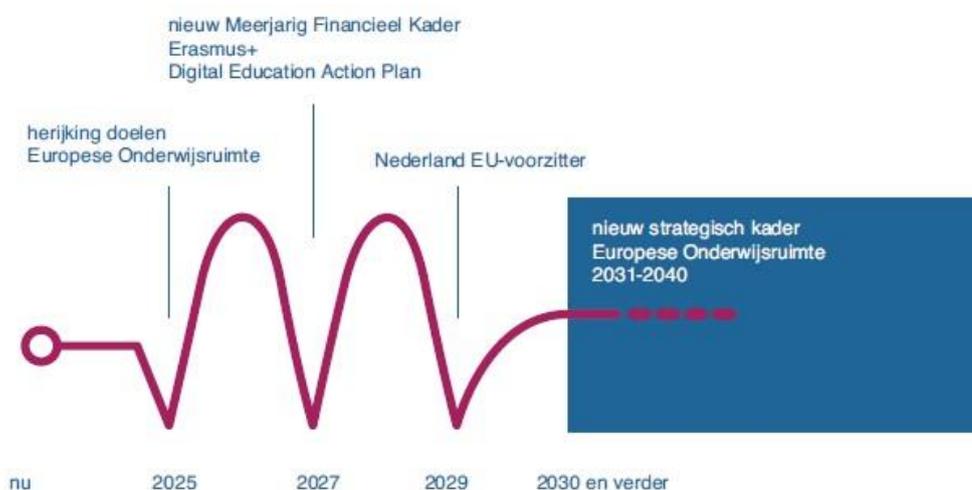
its standpoints in advance and forge alliances with representatives of like-minded Member States.⁸⁴

Use milestones in preparations

Starting in 2023, a series of strategic decisions will be taken in the European Union which will shape the strategic framework for the European Education Area, Erasmus+ and the Digital Education Action Plan. The progress of the present strategic framework for the European Education Area will be discussed in 2023, and the outcome will contribute to the evaluation and ultimately lead to a recalibration of the goals in 2025. A new European Commission will take office in 2024, with new ambitions, and that year also sees elections for the European Parliament. Members of that Parliament will also express views on the role of education in related policy domains. The current iterations of Erasmus+ and the Digital Education Action Plan expire in 2027. Negotiations on the continuation of Erasmus+ after 2027 are linked to the new Multiannual Financial Framework, which begins in 2028. From that year onwards, the Dutch government will also be expected to participate in regular exchanges between the previous, present and future presidencies in the run-up to the adoption of the new strategic framework for the European Education Area. In 2029, the Netherlands will assume the presidency of the European Union and therefore also of the Council of the European Union and the preparatory working groups. The Netherlands will then hold a key position in discussions about the new strategic framework for the European Education Area from 2031.

The Education Council sees these milestones as an opportunity for the Dutch government to move forward in a series of jumps to 2030 and beyond (see Figure 2). The idea is that the Dutch input at each milestone builds on the input for the previous milestone, until the Netherlands becomes president of the European Union in 2029. The milestones thus form a solid preparation for the Dutch EU presidency.

Figure 2: Milestones in the preparations for the Dutch EU presidency in 2029



3.2. Involve and use input of education professionals

The Council advises that the education sector be intensively involved in drawing up a Dutch strategic agenda for European education policy. Dutch education institutions, organisations, sectoral councils, government agencies and NGOs such as the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO) are actively engaged in European exchanges and cooperation, securing EU grants, participating in European (comparative) research and implementing the EU education

⁸⁴ The importance of timeliness in the EU policy-making process is emphasised by the recommendations in the 2005 report of the Joint Committee on Managing EU Affairs (the Van Voorst tot Voorst Committee) and the International Research and Policy Evaluation (IOB evaluation) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

objectives. Involving these bodies in drawing up the Dutch strategic agenda will enable the government to make use of their knowledge and expertise and gain an insight into their needs and ambitions.

Utilise knowledge and experience of education professionals through co-creation

The Council recommends that mechanisms be created when drawing up a Dutch strategic agenda which enable the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the education sector to continually share and coordinate knowledge, experience, needs and wishes in order to facilitate co-creation of policy.

Several education institutions and other stakeholders have gained experience with the implementation of European education policy and with applying for and receiving EU grants. They possess expertise, knowledge and information to enable the opportunities and risks of European developments to be assessed and to identify potential issues in implementation in educational practice. This knowledge, expertise, experience and information is a crucial ingredient for the Dutch strategic agenda, offering the Ministry an opportunity for co-creation, shaping the Dutch input for European education policy in partnership with stakeholders 'on the ground'.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has for a long time shared knowledge and experience with higher education institutions around the European Universities Initiative. The Education Council encourages exchanges of this kind, and proposes that this approach also be employed in building the Dutch strategic agenda. These exchanges between the Ministry and (representatives of) the education sector should then be placed on a continuous footing, in order to (continue) striving for clarity. The panel in section 2.4 shows that such a structure was lacking around the European Universities Initiative.

Seriously thinking through the Dutch and European ambitions in these areas in collaboration with the education sector will make clear what the Netherlands wishes to achieve in and with Europe. It will also make clear the areas where the Netherlands wishes to adopt a proactive stance in Europe, and also what the Netherlands believes should not form part of European education policy but should be reserved for Member States. The Dutch strategic agenda will then also contribute to an unambiguous embedding of education policy in the government-wide strategy on Europe.

Encourage and coordinate participation by the education sector in European education policy

The Education Council believes there are opportunities to allow education professionals and institutions to participate in European education policy even after the formulation of the Dutch strategic agenda is complete. This will ensure that the agenda continues to provide a valuable assessment framework for the Dutch input and continues to give direction to the policy of education institutions in the Netherlands.

The governance dynamic in Europe in relation to education offers scope for education institutions, their representatives and other stakeholders from the education sector to participate alongside government in the shaping, adoption and implementation of European education policy. This can be achieved by building on the activities and initiatives already being undertaken by education institutions and other stakeholders, but which are not yet recognised – and acknowledged – as participation in European education policy. A great deal happens through the agency of the European networks of education institutions or through the overarching sectoral councils. A number of stakeholders from the education sector also sit in expert groups of the European Commission in the preparation of policy.

The Council advises Dutch education ministers to encourage and coordinate all kinds of participation in European education policy. To facilitate this, the Ministry should acquire (and maintain) an overview of the participation by the Dutch education sector in European education policy; because at present not all education professionals and institutions are proportionately represented in Europe. The Council believes that education ministers need to ensure that all education stakeholders wishing to do so are able to participate in the establishment and implementation of European education policy. It is then vital to investigate what the education sector needs in terms of people, resources, time and knowledge in order to be able to genuinely participate in and implement European education policy.

Safeguard systemic responsibility

In the Council's view, it is important to ensure that participation by the education sector does not run against or erode the government's systemic responsibility for Dutch education.

The government's task is to ensure that important safeguards in the system remain intact and are not eroded under the influence of cross-border cooperation. As a minimum, this requires that the Dutch government has a clear view of the participation by education institutions in European cooperation and of European education policy. More specifically, the Council is referring to guarantees of the quality of education, accessibility of education and the civil effect of qualifications.⁸⁵ It is up to education ministers to reflect on how European education policy impacts on the national education policy and system, and vice versa. For example, the Education Council views the introduction of the Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF) as a positive step, but takes a negative view of its application to non-formal qualifications. This is because the latter could be interpreted as a form of accreditation which does not actually exist.⁸⁶ Given its systemic responsibility, the government's task is to set direction, weigh interests, take decisions and make choices regarding the Dutch stance towards and participation in European education policy, at all times with a view to optimising Dutch education.

3.3. Keep the objectives limited

In building a Dutch strategic agenda, the Education Council believes it is important to limit the number and extent of the objectives. A sharp focus will make the strategic agenda workable and effective.

Limiting the number of objectives provides focus

A strategic agenda with limited objectives provides focus and offers guidance to government and the education sector on how to operate within the European education policy and system. It will make Dutch ambitions with Europe in relation to education and education policy visible. At present, there is no coherent picture of the Dutch ambitions.

In Europe, this strategic agenda will make clear what the Dutch ambitions for education are. The agenda can then serve as a reference point for existing cooperation within institutions and with other EU countries in areas of shared interest. The strategic agenda can also offer greater clarity to the education sector on the course to be followed. A coherent picture of the Dutch ambitions will enable education professionals and organisations to anticipate the Dutch input for European education policy.

Contribute to education in the Netherlands and Europe

In the Council's view, the Dutch strategic agenda should focus not only on how the Netherlands can utilise European education policy for its own education (policy), but also on contributing to the development of education in other Member States. With a judicious choice of objectives, the Netherlands can make use of EU policy through student and teacher exchanges, EU grants, participation in programmes and sharing comparative research and knowledge, whilst at the same time itself contributing to European education policy, so that other EU countries can benefit from that contribution. The Council does not see strengthening education and education policy in other EU Member States as a goal in itself, but regards it as a way of supporting the economic and social development and broad prosperity of the Netherlands and the European Union. Moreover, quality improvement elsewhere will reduce the pressure on Dutch (higher) education.

Take account of differences between education sectors

The Education Council recommends that the strategic agenda take account of the wishes and needs of the different parts of the education system, with particular attention for senior secondary vocational education.

Different sectors of education have different wishes and needs with regard to European education policy, and different experiences with that policy. The Dutch strategic agenda needs to take account of this. For example, higher education institutions make the most use of EU grants and European exchange programmes for students and lecturers, and are expanding their cooperative ties in Europe. This also means that they encounter the most problems with implementation of the policy, for example through the growing interdependence of higher education institutions, especially in the context of the European Universities, and the alignment of European higher education policy with European science policy.

⁸⁵ For a broad discussion of the meaning of the government's systemic responsibility, see Onderwijsraad, 2019b.

⁸⁶ Onderwijsraad, 2019a.

In formulating the objectives for the Dutch strategic agenda, the Council calls for extra attention for senior secondary vocational education. Vocational education is receiving growing recognition for its contribution to solving the major challenges facing Europe, such as climate, labour market, digitalisation, migration and the energy transition. Yet the Dutch vocational education sector makes much less use than higher education of EU grants, European exchange programmes for students and teachers, and European cooperation opportunities. There is still an enormous amount to be gained here for vocational education. In the Council's view, specific topics for strategic reflection include lifelong development and, linked to this, the issues around microcredentials,⁸⁷ promoting strong vocational education, combined work and study programmes in other Member States and the recognition of vocational qualifications.

The Council believes that primary and secondary education must not be ignored in the Dutch strategic agenda. This sector of education has expressed a need for more knowledge-sharing with other European countries. Dutch primary schools, for example, would like to know how other EU Member States deal with teacher shortages, while Dutch secondary schools would like to know more about the use of (smart) technology in education in other European countries.⁸⁸

The Council also recommends that exchange programmes for pupils, students and staff in all sectors of education be included in the agenda.

3.4. Ensure coordination between education and related policy domains

When drawing up a Dutch strategic agenda for European education policy, the Council urges good coordination between education and related policy domains. In the Council's view, the best way of achieving this is through structural and intensive coordination and cooperation between government ministries.

A Dutch strategic agenda will 'work' if it takes account of the big picture and of the interrelationship between the various components. This will require a proactive stance from the government, not just on education, but also in coordination with adjacent policy domains. This is essential, because the EU education objectives are gradually becoming more closely linked to objectives for economic and social development in Europe and for the Stability and Growth Pact for the euro. By placing education within the context of surrounding policy domains, the strategic agenda will also help position education policy more prominently in the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework and the linked financial frameworks for programmes such as Erasmus+, ESF+ and the ERDF.

Interdependence of EU policy domains demands more cooperation between ministries

The Council believes that the increased European cooperation creates a need for good coordination between education and related policy domains, such as science policy, youth policy and labour market policy, when drawing up a Dutch strategic agenda. The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis, the energy transition and digitalisation have prompted European Member States to work together more closely. This cooperation also has consequences for European education policy. The Council believes that a better response is needed to this; starting with an understanding of how education is interwoven with related policy domains in an EU context.

First, the European Union categorises policies in a different way from the Member States. For example, vocational education and training is the responsibility of the EU Directorate-General for Employment, whereas in the Netherlands it falls within the remit of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. European policy on the labour market and economy, which has a strong influence on European education policy, is the responsibility of the Ministries of Social Affairs and Employment and of Economic Affairs and Climate Management in the Netherlands.

Second, the EU is devoting increasing attention to education (see section 2.2) in order to make a constructive contribution in areas such as labour market policy, regional policy, the

⁸⁷ See Glossary at the end of this report.

⁸⁸ See also Onderwijsraad, 2022b.

Green Deal and the energy transition (see section 2.3). The European Semester⁸⁹ informs Member States of where education policy should be adjusted in order to achieve economic and social objectives. The strategic framework for the European Education Area also contains an ambition to align education establishments more closely to the overarching priorities of the EU.⁹⁰ All this argues in favour of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science organising regular interdepartmental consultations on European education policy, potentially with the involvement of education professionals and organisations that are active in Brussels and Strasbourg.

3.5. Engage structurally with EU policy preparation

Finally, the Education Council recommends that when drawing up a Dutch strategic agenda, the government should engage structurally with the EU policy preparation in this domain, and take account of the input of experts and of the governance dynamic in Brussels (and Strasbourg).

Take a proactive stance

Actively helping to shape EU (education) policy requires more from the Dutch government than simply playing an active role in the decision-making at the moment that a proposal is on the table. A proactive approach means that the government is structurally engaged in the preparation of the strategies and multiannual programmes of the European Commission, but also in the proposals which are developed within the programmes each year. The European governance dynamic in education, and the influence, steering and policy that ensues from it, also demand a proactive approach.

Although the Council of the European Union takes the decisions on policy proposals, in many cases it is the European Commission which writes those proposals. The Commission gathers information and builds on the conclusions and recommendations of the Council of the European Union. Proactive engagement with European education policy therefore also demands engagement by the Dutch government in policy development in the Commission. Policy proposals can be influenced during this phase, before they even come to the Council of Ministers for decision. The Education Council recommends that, with this in mind, the government align with the work programme published each year by the European Commission, where possible engaging during the writing phase.⁹¹

Make use of experts

In the EU policy preparation process, the Education Council recommends making strategic use of experts in the Union. A strong Dutch representation in the expert groups is necessary in the Council's view in order to influence education policy at an early stage. Expert groups are the most important source of information in the preparation of EU policy by the European Commission.⁹² The Commission convenes the meetings, compiles the agenda and sets goals. The Commission is itself free to invite and select experts and stakeholders. Member States can delegate their own experts to the thematic expert/working groups which have been set up in the context of the European Education Area. The Commission uses open calls for other expert groups, to which experts can then apply themselves. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has no direct influence on this, but ought to know in a timely manner in which of the proposed expert groups a strong Dutch representation is important and which Dutch experts could best participate in them. It also makes sense to aim for strategic secondment of officials from the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) or other relevant Commission departments.

Take account of the governance dynamic in European education policy

European education policy is the result of a complex and multi-layered governance dynamic, in which Member States and European or affiliated institutions express, steer, cooperate, exert influence and reach agreements on their ambitions and initiatives. The Education Council believes it is of great importance for Dutch education ministers to respond effectively to, flex with and give direction to this dynamic in order to be able to help shape European education policy. To this end the Netherlands (government, ministries and Parliament) could focus more, and more effectively, through the contacts in the European Commission and negotiations in the Council of the European Union, on suitable

⁸⁹ See Glossary at the end of this report.

⁹⁰ Raad van de Europese Unie, 2021b.

⁹¹ See also European Commission, 2022d.

⁹² Akse, 2020.

mechanisms and instruments, such as combinations of legislation and regulation, coordination, funding and information. Partnerships are also crucial within the European governance dynamic. Social partners (including education institutions) in the Member States and national parliaments often have very little idea of what is happening, and the knowledge of and familiarity with the governance dynamic in Europe differs per Member State. As a result, Member States miss out on opportunities to exert influence and help shape events in Europe. A good network and knowledge of other EU Member States is crucial to make the fullest use of the opportunities offered by the Dutch EU presidency and engage seriously with the Dutch education strategy for Europe. Regular contact from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science with the embassies of the other 26 EU Member States and their permanent representations to the Union, as well as the Dutch embassies in European capitals, would be helpful here.

Glossary

Assessment of new Commission proposals (BNC documents)

A BNC document contains a description by the Dutch government of the Dutch standpoint on a new proposal from the European Commission. It summarises the policy proposal and the Dutch view on its subsidiarity and proportionality. It also makes an assessment of the financial and legal implications and the feasibility of the proposed policy. The BNC document is drawn up by the ministry with responsibility for the area covered by the proposal, and is adopted in the Cabinet, after which it goes to Parliament and Dutch MEPs. The negotiators from the Dutch Permanent Representation to the European Union base their input during the negotiations on the proposal partly on the BNC document.

Bologna Declaration

The Bologna Declaration is an agreement between 29 European countries to reform their higher education systems. The Declaration set in motion the Bologna Process, to which 48 European countries and the European Commission have now signed up. The purpose of the Declaration in 2010 was to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The signatory countries made agreements among other things on greater student mobility, the introduction of a Bachelor/Masters structure, the transferability of course credits, cooperation between education establishments and promoting cooperation on quality assurance.

Cedefop

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) is a European Union agency which supports the development and implementation of European policy on vocational education and training. Cedefop supports the European Commission, Member States and the European social partners with vocational education and training policy, by disseminating knowledge, supplying empirical data and providing services for policy-building, and by facilitating knowledge sharing among Union actors and with national actors.

Centres of Vocational Excellence

Centres of Vocational Excellence are international alliances between vocational education institutes and partners in the (regional) labour market. The aim is to raise the quality of vocational education and training and to contribute to regional development, innovation, formation of industrial clusters, smart specialisation and social inclusion.

Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP)

The European Commission presented its second Digital Education Action Plan in 2020, covering the period 2021-2027. The Commission is keen to strengthen the role of digitalisation in education. The Action Plan has two strategic priorities: (1) promoting the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem; and (2) improving the digital skills and competences of the European population with a view to the digital transformation. The current plan runs concurrently with the Erasmus+ programme.

Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is a European grants programme for education, training, youth and sport. Among its goals are promoting educational quality, combating unemployment (especially among young people), supporting innovation and promoting cooperation and mobility with EU partner countries. The current programme runs from 2021 to 2027.

Europe 2020 strategy

The Europe 2020 strategy was a long-term project by the European Union aimed at creating a strong, sustainable economy with high employment. It built on the Lisbon Strategy and was intended to ensure that the European economy developed into a highly competitive, social and green market economy. Like the Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 was a ten-year strategy.

European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

The ERDF aims to reduce the differences between Europe's regions. The fund is used to promote socioeconomic development in deprived regions, including through cooperation between the regional labour market, education and innovation. The focus in all ERDF programmes for 2021-2027 is on a 'smarter' and 'greener' Europe.

European Parliament

The European Parliament is the directly elected representative organ of the European Union and, together with the Council of the European Union (see below), is empowered to amend or adopt bills and to take decisions on the EU budget. The European Parliament also oversees the activities of the European Commission and other EU bodies.

European Semester

The European Semester is the annual cycle for the coordination of the economic and budgetary policy of the EU Member States. It was set up in 2011 following the euro crisis. In the Semester, the European Commission analyses the national budgets of the Member States and then makes recommendations which must be taken into account by the Member States when drawing up their national budgets.

European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

The ESF+ is a large European fund intended to strengthen EU policy in the fields of employment, social affairs, education and skills. The ESF+ brings four programmes together: the European Social Fund (ESF), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), the Youth Employment Initiative and the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI).

EU-level targets / benchmarks

EU-level targets are non-binding agreements in which Member States work together to achieve average targets at EU level.

(New) European Skills Agenda

The European Commission published the (New) European Skills Agenda (for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience) in 2020. It comprises a five-year plan aimed at strengthening the quality and relevance of learned skills, making qualifications more visible and comparable, and improving the use of relevant skills on the labour market. The Agenda stemmed from the idea that sustainability, digitalisation and the pandemic demand extensive retraining and reskilling of the European labour force to address a perceived mismatch between what young people learn in education and what the labour market demands of them. The New European Skills Agenda builds on the 2016 Skills Agenda. It is implemented through existing programmes such as the ESF and Erasmus+. The Commission has designated 2023 the Year of Skills.

European Commission

The European Commission is the executive organ of the European Union. It consists of 27 EU Commissioners, each of whom is responsible for one or more policy domains. The European Commission has the right to take initiatives, which means that in most policy domains it is the only organ permitted to make proposals for new legislation. In addition, the Commission enforces the application of EU treaties, draws up the budget and manages the various programmes. Finally, the Commission is the external representative of the European Union in those areas for which it has competence.

European Education Area

The European Education Area is an initiative of the EU dating from 2017. Its aim is to strengthen educational cooperation between EU Member States and to contribute to social and economic growth, the green transition and the digital transition. Within the European Education Area, Member States strive for quality, equality of opportunity and inclusion in education. This includes lifelong learning and mobility for European citizens, as well as quality assurance for teachers and trainers.

European Union (EU)

The European Union is an international union of 27 European countries, which together pursue a common policy principally in the areas of a free internal market, development, environment, trade, agriculture and aid in natural disasters. There are seven EU institutions: the European Parliament, the European Council (government leaders), the Council of the European Union (government ministers), the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the European Court of Auditors.

European Universities

European Universities are transnational alliances of higher education institutes with a common long-term strategy, which promote European values and identity and together provide education on global issues such as climate change, health and sustainability. The initiative forms part of the Erasmus+ programme.

Eurydice

Eurydice is an online catalogue published by the European Commission describing and comparing the European education systems.

Proportionality principle

The EU proportionality principle states that the authority of the Union may not extend further than is necessary to achieve the objectives of the treaties. Proportionality is one of the guiding principles of the European Union, set out in Article 5, paragraph 4 of the Treaty on European Union and in Protocol (No 2) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

The Charter of Fundamental Rights sets out all fundamental rights which apply in the EU. It covers topics such as freedom, equality, solidarity and citizenship. Most of these rights already receive extra protection through the European Convention on Human Rights, published by the Council of Europe. The Charter of Fundamental Rights has been legally binding since 1 December 2009 for the EU institutions and for EU Member States, but only where they implement EU law.

Copenhagen Process

The Copenhagen Process began in 2002, when 31 European countries signed up to a declaration to strengthen European cooperation in vocational education and training. The Copenhagen Process was part of the Lisbon Strategy. It aims to make vocational education more attractive and improve its quality. Participating countries made agreements among other things on the comparability of vocational qualifications, cooperation on quality assurance, transferability of VET-credits (Vocational Education and Training) and lifelong learning.

Lisbon Strategy

The Lisbon Strategy was a long-term European strategy intended to make the European Union the most competitive knowledge-based region in the world. Among the agreements was the objective of growing public investments in research and innovation to 3% of gross domestic product in 2010.

Multiannual Financial Framework

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is the long-term EU budget, spanning seven years and serving as the basis for the annual budgeting. It lays down the maximum amounts of the budgets for various EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, ESF+ and the ERDF. An interim evaluation will take place in 2023, and discussions on a new period of seven years will begin in 2025.

Microcredentials

Microcredentials are accreditations of the learning outcomes of small educational units, such as short courses, training courses or modules. They offer a flexible means of helping people acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies they need for their personal or professional development.

Open Method of Coordination

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a form of soft governance within the governance dynamic of Europe. It covers policy domains on which decisions are reserved for the Member States but where there is a need for mutual coordination. It involves Member States working together to set and evaluate policy objectives, after which they are free to translate those objectives into national policy as they see fit. The OMC is a combination of national adaptation and European cooperation, based on consensus. Although all Member States generally participate, the cooperation is not binding, and this can lead to differentiation in national policy.

Osnabrück Declaration 2021-2025

The Osnabrück Declaration by EU education ministers describes four goals for vocational education aimed at contributing to recovery after the pandemic and promoting green and digital transitions: (1) first-class, high-quality vocational education; (2) vocational education in post-initial education and lifelong learning; (3) contribution by vocational education to the climate transition; and (4) cross-border mobility and cooperation.

Council of the European Union

The Council of the European Union (also referred to as the Council of Ministers) represents the governments of the EU Member States and, together with the European Parliament, is

the principal decision-making body of the European Union. In collaboration with the European Parliament and based on proposals by the European Commission, the Council establishes EU law and coordinates the policy of the Member States. The Council also develops the EU's foreign and security policy and enters into agreements with other countries and international organisations. Finally, the Council and the European Parliament jointly set the EU budget. The Council of the European Union meets in different configurations, depending on the policy domain to be discussed. For example, when the Council is meeting to discuss education, the education ministers of the Member States come together in the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council (EYCS). Vocational education, and more specifically policy aimed at developing skills and improving the match between education and the labour market, is also discussed in the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO). Council meetings are prepared by officials from the Member States and the Permanent Representation of the Member States to the EU.

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is an organisation of which all European countries are members, with the exception of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Vatican City. It is a collaborative body of European governments, not to be confused with the European Union or the European Council. The aim of the Council of Europe is to protect and strengthen human rights, the rule of law and democracy throughout Europe. This also includes attention for European culture and diversity.

OECD

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental organisation which promotes economic development and world trade. It comprises 38 member countries and offers a platform to study and coordinate social and economic policy. Member countries seek to pursue a common policy to promote sustainable economic growth, foster employment, assure financial stability and support economic developments in other countries.

PISA

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international comparative study which measures the skills and knowledge of 15 year-olds in mathematics, natural sciences and reading. Around 80 countries take part in the study, which is overseen by the OECD.

Subsidiarity principle

Under the subsidiarity principle, the EU may only act in policy domains that do not fall within its exclusive competence if the objectives of that policy cannot be adequately realised by Member States, and provided the Union is capable of doing this. It is one of the leading principles of the European Union, as set out in Article 5, paragraph 3 of the Treaty on European Union.

Soft governance

Soft governance is a means of governing using instruments that are less coercive and offer greater scope for interpretation than hard forms of governance such as orders and prohibitions or financial sanctions. Soft governance occurs when a group of actors develop agreements or guidance.

Treaty on European Union

This Treaty sets out the values which must be upheld by the European Union and all Member States, as well as the main objectives of the European Union. Together with the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, this Treaty forms the legal basis for the European Union. It was signed on 7 February 1992 by the then 12 members of the European Community. The Treaty formed part of the Treaty of Maastricht. It has been amended several times since then; the most recent amendments, enacted by the Lisbon Treaty, came into force on 1 December 2009.

Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union is an amended version of the Treaty Establishing the European Economic Community. The amended version came into force in 2009. The Treaty sets out the competences of the European Union and how it may exercise them. Together with the Treaty on European Union, this Treaty forms the legal basis for the European Union.

Experts consulted

Ms T.N. Aler	Association of Teachers of Living Languages (VLLT)
Ms G. Allard	Regional Training Centre Amsterdam - Flevoland
Ms E.A.M. van den Bergh	Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
Mr J. Blaas	Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
Ms D. de Boer	Innofius
Ms L. van den Bosch	Foundation for Dutch Education Worldwide (NOB)
Mr J.F.M. Brink	Association of Teachers of Living Languages (VLLT)
Ms M. Brugman	Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO
Mr J. Bruins	Leiden University
Ms M. Brussaard	ArtEZ University of the Arts
Mr M. Chahim	European Parliament
Mr J. Divis	SLO
Mr P.J. Duisenberg	Universities of the Netherlands
Ms A. Eekhout	European Parliament
Mr K. van Eunen	Association of Teachers of Living Languages (VLLT)
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Mr D. van Gessel	Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
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Ms N. Groenendijk	Nuffic / National Erasmus+ Agency
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