

**THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN
THE NETHERLANDS 2006/2007**

Institutions in 2006 (agricultural education excl.)

| | |
|---|-------|
| Primary education | 6.929 |
| Special education (special primary education) | 320 |
| Special education (e.g. students who are blind, deaf, disabled or who have strong behavioural problems) | 323 |
| Secondary education | 652 |
| Vocational training and adult education | 61 |
| Higher professional education | 4 |
| University | 12 |

Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2007)

Personnel in full-time equivalents x 1000 in 2006 (agricultural education excl.)

| | |
|---|-------|
| (Special) primary education | 113,8 |
| Special education (e.g. students who are blind, deaf, disabled or who have strong behavioural problems) | 17,8 |
| Secondary education | 83,9 |
| Vocational training and adult education | 37,0 |
| Higher professional education | 24,5* |
| University | 36,9* |

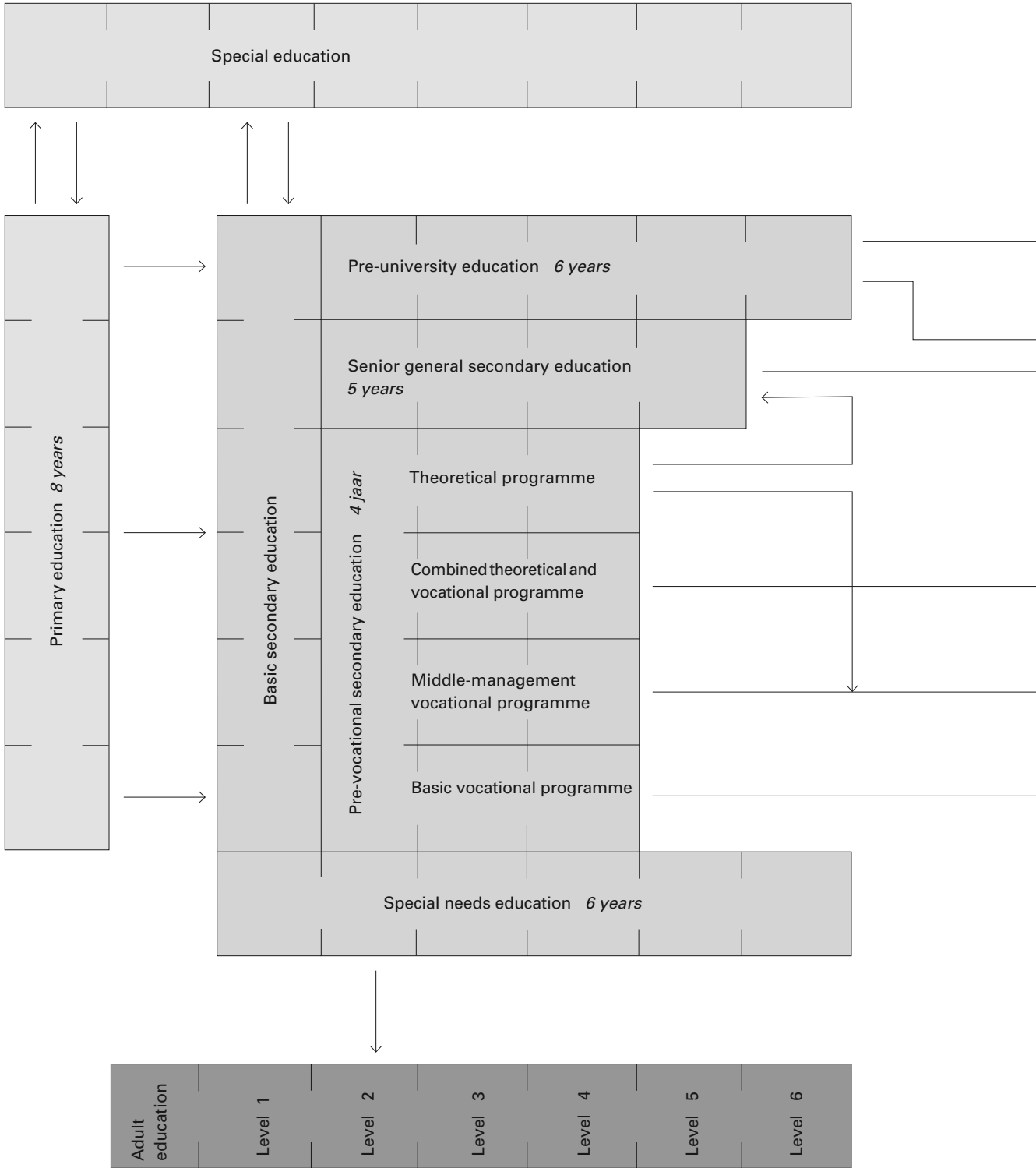
Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2007)

*Data 2005

Pupils/students x 1000 in 2006 (agricultural education excl.)

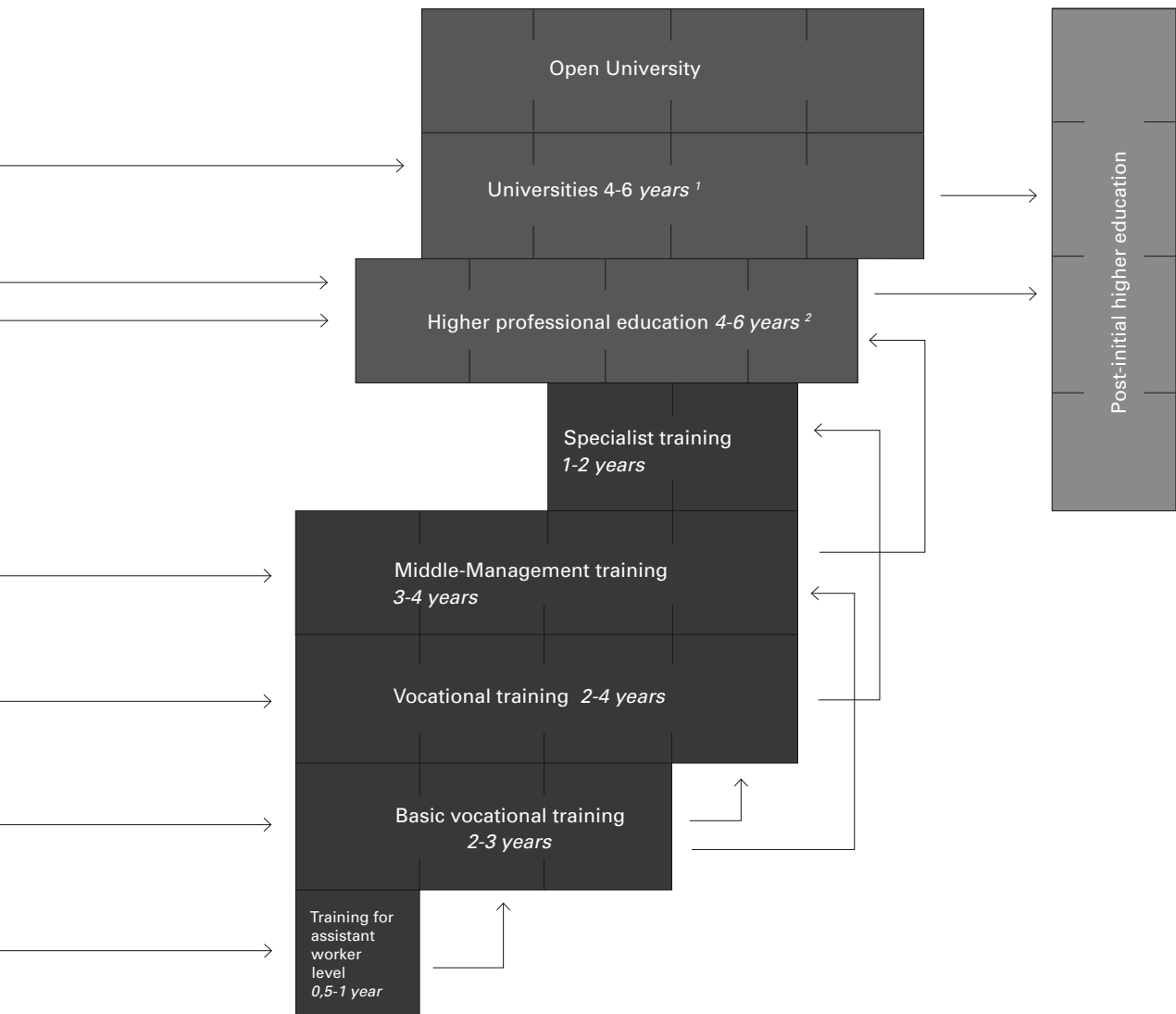
| | |
|--|---------|
| Primary education | 1.548,6 |
| Special education (special primary education) | 46,3 |
| Special education (e.g. students who are blind, deaf, disabled or who have strong behavioural problems) in primary education | 36,2 |
| Special education (e.g. students who are blind, deaf, disabled or who have strong behavioural problems) in secondary education | 27,2 |
| Secondary education | 797,4 |
| Learning support programmes and special needs education | 112,1 |
| Vocational secondary education | 465,9 |
| Adult education | 142,0 |
| Higher professional education | 357,3 |
| University | 201,8 |

Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2007)



Source: Primary education, Guide for parents and guardians 2003-2004

The Dutch education system



1. Primary education

2. Pre-university education, senior general secondary education, pre-vocational secondary education and employment-oriented training are types of secondary education.

3. Training for assistant worker level, basic vocational training, vocational training, middle-management and specialist training are types of senior secondary vocational education. These courses are not available at all levels.

4. Open university, university and higher professional education are types of higher education.

5. Adult education has 4 courses: adult general, secondary education, Dutch as a second language, self-reliance and versatility.

6. Post-initial higher education

¹ Bachelor 3 years, Master 1-3 years

² Bachelor 4 years, Master 1-2 years

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN
THE NETHERLANDS 2006/2007

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| | | |
|----------|---|-----------|
| 1 | Basic skills | 5 |
| 1.1 | Structural flaws | 5 |
| 1.2 | Data-driven teaching | 6 |
| 1.3 | Learning standards and compulsory testing | 7 |
| 1.4 | Determining output | 8 |
| | | |
| 2 | Early school leaving | 10 |
| 2.1 | Secondary education | 10 |
| 2.2 | Secondary vocational education | 11 |
| 2.3 | Reporting absences and early school leaving | 11 |
| 2.4 | Missing links in the chain | 12 |
| 2.5 | Accessibility of higher education | 12 |
| 2.6 | Change | 13 |
| | | |
| 3 | Teachers make the difference | 14 |
| 3.1 | Shortage of teachers | 14 |
| | | |
| 4 | Under-performing schools and schools at risk | 16 |
| 4.1 | Under-performing schools | 16 |
| 4.2 | Schools at risk | 16 |
| | | |
| 5 | Formal annual load | 18 |
| | | |
| 6 | Conclusion | 19 |

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS 2006/2007

Greater insight into causes In the Education Report of 2005/2006, the Inspectorate of Education in the Netherlands asked for attention to be paid to specific problems regarding the quality of Dutch education. Further research in this respect was conducted in the period 2006/2007, the period which the 2006/2007 Education Report covers. Greater insight was thus gained into the causes of the problems that have been the subject of increased public scrutiny recently. This booklet offers an abstract of the main topics of the 2006/2007 Education Report.

Sufficient quality The Inspectorate notes that the quality of Dutch education at the majority of institutions can definitely be said to be sufficient. And yet, just like last year, the Inspectorate has concerns about:

- the growing number of students whose basic skills (language and maths) are insufficient to be able to function properly in our society;
- the school drop-out rate among students (early school leavers);
- schools at risk and under-performing schools at which performances are poor and students run an increased risk of encountering problems in their school career;
- assertion of the statutory formal annual load.

This booklet discusses each of these points. The Inspectorate has determined that not every school devotes equal attention to students with specific disadvantages or to students who are in danger of dropping out. When teachers focus on these students, it appears that more students remain in the education system and achieve a higher level of skill in language and maths. In the time ahead this will constitute the biggest challenge for schools at risk and under-performing schools.

1 Basic skills

Not every opportunity is being used The insufficient performance of students in the fields of maths and language, about which the Inspectorate has reported for several years, has been confirmed by recent international studies conducted among Dutch students aged nine and fifteen. Although the backgrounds of the students have a major impact on the level of the basic skills they are able to achieve, schools and their boards are not seizing every opportunity to tackle these problems.

Risks during the school career Problems with basic skills first appear at schools at which the school careers of students entail risks. At 5 percent of primary schools final output is very poor and at 9 percent of the schools the performances of large groups of students remain far behind those of their peers. In the secondary education sector, the average mark in the central examinations is lower than 6 (out of 10) at 6 percent of schools.

1.1 Structural flaws

The increase in the numbers of students with inadequate basic skills does not, however, only relate to schools that are at risk. It also results from structural flaws in both the primary and secondary education systems.

Gearing education to the differences among students An important cause behind the number of poor readers is the fact that many teachers in the primary education sector have problems gearing their instruction to the differences between the students and in providing sufficient care to low-achieving and under-performing students. Although the Inspectorate already considered this to be the Achilles' heel of the primary education sector more than ten years ago, insufficient progress has been made in this area in recent years.

Schools with and without low-achieving students Recently, the Inspectorate once again conducted a specific study into the differences between schools with and without low-achieving students. Primary schools without low-achieving students appear to distinguish themselves in several areas: they are better at testing and analysing student progress and in determining the needs of low-achieving students, and they ensure that certain minimum attainment targets are actually achieved by low-achieving students. They also provide low-achieving students with additional feedback and assistance and encourage them to become and remain involved by offering varying work formats.

Drop in the quality of teaching Under-performance regarding basic skills cannot, however, be entirely blamed on the primary education sector. The quality of secondary education is falling in a number of key areas and is stagnating in others. Over a number of years, a gradual fall can be seen in the efficient use of the teaching time. In comparison with 2001, more scheduled educational activities are cancelled and more students are absent without permission. There has also been a gradual decline in the quality of teaching since 2001. There is less task orientation, explanations are less clear and students are offered less stimulating work. Moreover, the quality of special needs provision and guidance counselling for low-achieving students has stagnated.

A study conducted by the Inspectorate among 72 junior secondary vocational education schools (VMBOs) revealed the following:

- At the beginning of the school year, teachers of Dutch in half of the schools with a basic vocational programme have no insight into the language performances achieved by their students at primary school, although such overviews are available at school.
- 70 percent of the junior secondary vocational education schools in the study do not specify the level that students should have achieved by the end of the second school year, nor do they test it.
- At three-quarters of the junior secondary vocational education schools investigated, there was no structural or recognisable approach set down for tackling language disadvantages.

1.2 Data-driven teaching

No systematic evaluation of output An important point regarding the problem of inadequate basic skills is that many schools do not systematically evaluate output and classroom teaching: at more than 60 percent of primary and secondary schools evaluating output and teaching is not general practice. This makes it difficult for schools to control the quality of the education provided. This applies to an even greater extent to school boards: less than 5 percent of boards that have several schools under their authority have access to evaluation data regarding the output and classroom teaching of all their schools. With regard to school boards responsible for only one school, only one in six has access to such data. Consequently, these boards are not able to check if all students at their schools are learning adequately or if the schools are providing sufficient added value for their students.

Analysis of educational achievements Much research is now available that shows that data-driven-teaching can offer a solution to this problem. Concepts that come to the fore in this respect are “the teacher as researcher” or “evaluation for teaching”, as opposed to “evaluation of teaching”. In all instances, this entails implementing an analysis of the educational achievements of students and analysing the needs of students who “stand out”. To this end, national, standardised tests should be used, as it is otherwise impossible to determine which students are ahead of or lagging behind their peers elsewhere in the country. The next step is to offer systematic assistance to students who need it: from the teaching perspective, this can be done by modifying the curriculum content to enable these students to achieve the minimum targets of the school year too. Rather than lowering the minimum targets, this entails that these students receive additional didactic assistance, preferably in their own class, from their own teacher.

Instruction “Pre-teaching” and “re-teaching” are often advocated: just before the lesson, low-achieving students are taken aside for a short while and are given a preview of what will be covered in the lesson. After this instruction, for example while the class is dealing with the subject matter, they are taken aside again to check whether they have properly understood the subject matter. If not, an additional explanation will be given to this group. Further extension of the learning time and providing low-achieving students with systematic feedback are important factors. Retaining involvement in lessons by

providing variation in how subject matter is dealt with, is also very important. This also applies to the evaluation of the assistance provided to low-achieving students and, if necessary, the adjustment of the approach used for these students.

School improvement projects Various publications have appeared on data-driven teaching. This form of teaching constitutes the basis of several Dutch school improvement projects in which the performances of low-achieving students have shown striking improvement. With regard to decoding, for example, interventions in the BOV-project led to a fall in the percentage of low-achieving students in the 6-year-old age group from almost 22 percent to less than 5 percent. On the introduction of the LISBO-project, aimed at improving reading in (special) primary education, only 6 percent of students were achieving reading level 9. Two years later, at the end of the project, the percentage had risen to 65 percent. In the HARD-project, the number of students with reading problems fell to 6 percent. In the KRW-project, aimed at improving the quality of arithmetic and maths, the number of students underachieving in arithmetic/maths in the experimental group fell to less than 1 percent, while the number in the control group more than doubled. The schools that participated in a project about school development (SOP) had earlier been judged by the Inspectorate as “under-performing”. The majority of these underperforming schools succeeded in ridding themselves of this designation with the assistance of this project.

1.3 Learning standards and compulsory testing

Minimum level for students The level of reading and maths performances of the weakest students gives cause to consider minimum targets, learning standards and reference levels. When reviewing the test material schools use to determine the educational achievements of their students, one can quickly conclude that there are many good tests, but the norms vary. Many commonly used tests have their origins (and norms) in the last century. Furthermore, the students participating in a test may be of very different ages. Consequently, it is difficult for teachers and schools to establish a clear goal for the students to strive for. In the 2005/2006 Education Report, the Inspectorate stated that teachers in both the primary and secondary education sectors would benefit from more clarity about the minimum level that could be expected from students with regard to their skills in reading and maths. In both these subject areas minimum targets could then be set for various age groups.

Setting down what students should know and be capable of The government has put this on the agenda and has decided that by 2009 clear standards should be established with regard to what students should know and what they should be capable of at the end of their primary education in the fields of language and maths. For secondary education, the government also wants to make explicit what level students should reach. These minimum targets should be formulated in such a way that every student of normal intelligence at every school should be able to achieve them. In this respect it is important that all schools are explicitly asked to test whether all students of normal intelligence actually achieve these minimum targets. For school boards and the Inspectorate this is an important tool for ensuring that the basic quality of education is, and remains, guaranteed.

Test results Needless to say, it is not sufficient to only secure the minimum targets at the lower limit. The performances of good students should also be involved. All students should learn enough and schools should provide added value to each and every student. Therefore, the Inspectorate supports the availability of the results of standardised tests (as is done in England) conducted among all students at the ages of, for example, nine, twelve and fifteen. In this way, schools can determine whether they have provided their students with sufficient added value. Moreover, more insight could be gained into the development of basic skills.

1.4 Determining output

The quality of education is increasingly assessed using output information provided by the schools themselves. This practice entails risks.

Participation in tests Currently, primary schools are not obliged to participate in nationwide standardised tests. Almost one hundred schools (out of almost seven thousand) choose not to participate. This means that they are not able to account for their output. Furthermore, some 6 percent of primary schools do not properly follow the guidelines for administering tests. Although the discrepancies are often only minor, they can have an impact on the results. Determining output is made even more difficult because some primary schools do not have all their students take the tests. A school may have good reasons for doing so: for example, foreign students may have been in the Netherlands for too short a time to be able to read and understand a test in Dutch. In some cases, schools do not include students moving on to special education in these tests. However, the situation is different for students who, after primary school, will receive extra and structural learning support at secondary school. They are expected to participate in a test and, if necessary, they receive specially modified test material. Almost one-quarter of primary schools, however, do not have these students take a (modified) final test. And then there is the phenomenon of illness. At almost 16 percent of primary schools, more students are absent due to illness during testing periods than at other times. Although there are resits for students who were ill, this option is not taken up by all primary schools by a long way. Finally, at a further 5 percent of primary schools, one or more students are absent from testing for reasons other than illness.

Measures A relatively new phenomenon is that schools test all students, but do not include the results of all the students tested in their accounting. In 2003/2004, this was the case at over 30 percent of primary schools. In the 2005/2006 school year, this percentage had risen to almost 40 percent. The Inspectorate has now taken measures to include these students in its own assessment of the outputs of these schools.

Exam marks In the secondary education sector there are problems in determining outputs too. The final exam at secondary schools consists of two components:

- a school exam for which the school itself is fully responsible;
- a central exam for which institutions specialised in educational testing are responsible and which is the same for every school in every year.

The exam results of students consist of the average of these two components. Due to the statutory freedom of schools to design their own school exams, legal inequality can arise between students from different schools. Therefore, the Inspectorate assesses

the differences in marking between the school exam and the central exam and calls schools to account when necessary. Since 2007, the discrepancy between school exam marks and central exam marks has been one of the elements by which the outputs of schools have been compared and assessed. Various reports have been published on the differences in marking in 2007. It turns out that at 13, 10 and 28 percent of standard schools for junior secondary vocational education (theoretical programme), higher general secondary education and pre-university education respectively, the average difference between the mark in the school exam and the mark in the central exam was between half a point and a whole point (out of ten). At a further 1 percent of junior secondary vocational schools (theoretical programme) and higher general secondary schools and at 2 percent of pre-university schools, the average discrepancy over three years was more than a whole point.

Quality assurance With a view to better quality assurance, the legally equal treatment of students and faith in the examination system, the issue of quality assurance has been laid down in the agreements between the schools and the Minister of Education regarding secondary education. The starting point is that the difference between the marks for the school exam and for the central exam should not exceed an average of more than half a point.

2 Early school leaving

Dropping out among students A second cause for concern is the high drop-out rate among students in the education system. Internationally, there are several definitions of dropping out. In the secondary education sector and senior secondary vocational education sector, the Inspectorate defines early school leaving as students leaving the education system without having obtained a diploma at the second level of secondary vocational education, in higher general secondary education or in pre-university education. In this (European) definition, students who obtain a diploma in junior secondary vocational education, but who do not transfer to secondary vocational education, are considered to be early school leavers. In higher education, dropping out means that students stop following the programme they began or stop following a programme to which they had transferred.

Diploma Of the 1.3 million young people who were in secondary education, secondary vocational education or general secondary education for adults in the 2004/2005 school year, on 1 October 2005 some 60,500 had left the education system without having obtained a diploma at the second level of secondary vocational education, in higher general secondary education or pre-university education. The figure for the 2005/2006 school year was 54,100 new early school leavers and the provisional figure for the 2006/2007 school year is 53,100. Experience has shown that a proportion of early school leavers returns to school the following year. The majority of early school leavers are found in the conurbations of the big cities and in some parts in the south of the Netherlands.

Over 7 percent of non-Western ethnic-minority students drop out of the education system. This figure is twice that for native-Dutch young people. Almost two-thirds of early school leavers have repeated a year once or twice or have been transferred to a different type of education.

Basic qualification Almost 20 percent of early school leavers leave secondary education without even obtaining a diploma at the level of junior secondary vocational education. About 11 percent early school leavers leave secondary education after obtaining a diploma at the level of junior secondary vocational education. The remaining 69 percent leave secondary vocational education or secondary education for adults without obtaining the basic qualifications for entering the labour market.

2.1 Secondary education

Too many early school leavers On 1 October 2006, approximately ten thousand more young people had left secondary education without a diploma (without even a diploma at junior secondary vocational education level). Almost 40 percent of them had already left in the first years and a further 30 percent left early from the middle management or basic vocational programmes of junior secondary vocational education. The remaining 30 percent left the theoretical (or combined) programmes of junior secondary vocational education, or left higher general secondary education or pre-university education. These percentages are far too large.

Improvement The group of early school leavers includes many students from ethnic-minority backgrounds. Many of the early school leavers already repeated a year. The inspectorate has found that schools where early school leaving occurs, have definitely done more in terms of time management and safety policy than other schools have. However, it is clear that much can be improved in the quality of the curriculum and care for low-achieving students. Schools can gear their subject matter better to exam requirements and particularly to the educational needs of these students. Furthermore, schools can devote more attention to assuring the quality of classroom teaching and to providing a school climate marked by mutual respect. The quality assurance of testing is also in clear need of improvement at these schools, and the same goes for involving parents in the school.

2.2 Secondary vocational education

Fewer early school leavers? In the 2005/2006 school year, 36,300 young people left secondary vocational education without any basic qualifications. This represents 9 percent of enrolled participants. In 2004, the figure was almost 41,000 participants. Unfortunately, these figures cannot easily be compared because the count in 2004/2005 was not yet complete and the figure was therefore estimated. However, there are indications that early school leaving is declining.

Large differences between students The highest percentage of early school leavers is found in the technology and economics sectors, the lowest in the agricultural and health care/welfare sectors. There appear to be large differences between the institutions. It should be noted in this respect that institutions with greater access for students from ethnic minorities, participants from socially disadvantaged groups and participants with a low level of prior education, also have a higher drop-out rate. In addition, it is difficult for students with special needs to find a suitable practical training placement on time. This endangers the programmes of these students. Intensifying assurance regarding practical training placements could possibly prevent dropping out. Nevertheless, institutions with many early school leavers often have a lower quality of intake/assessment, vocational guidance and guidance in case of learning problems, personal problems and social problems. The more intense the guidance, the higher the probability that problems are identified in time and dropping out can be avoided.

2.3 Reporting absences and early school leaving

Unclear and complex legislation and regulations Being alert and taking quick action are important elements in preventing definite school leaving. However, reports from the secondary vocational education sector to the school attendance officer, the Regional Registration Centres for Early School Leavers (RMCs) and to the Ministry of Education (IBG), are often inconsistent and not made in time. Often, these reports are purely administrative and lack substantive information. This makes it more difficult for school attendance officers and the RMCs to provide adequate assistance. Many institutions do not know that children of compulsory school age must be reported to the school attendance officer. When school attendance officers and the RMCs cooperate, reporting generally improves. A major obstacle in the reporting structure for absence and early

school leaving is the lack of clarity and the complexity of the legislation and regulations. There are seven different laws which include articles regarding the reporting of absence and early school leaving and each law encompasses different reporting obligations and different deadlines for reporting. Sometimes schools make choices between the different laws, sometimes schools are not familiar with the regulations.

2.4 Missing links in the chain

Reporting early school leaving Apparently, at the institutions concerned, there are missing links in the process regarding the reporting of early school leaving. In the first place, the administrative processes (and sometimes the related computer systems too) at education institutions are not always up-to-date. The same can also apply to the school attendance officers and RMCs that have to deal with quite a number of different (computer) systems, which means that the manner in which information is requested from schools and institutions varies greatly. Furthermore, it turns out that the approaches to handling reports vary.

Improving the chain Throughout the entire chain, reporting and giving feedback reports is not given enough priority. Schools and institutions do not always keep accurate records of absences. More energy is spent on care for students than on reporting and referrals. School attendance officers, Regional Registration Centres (RMCs) and the Ministry (IBG) not only fail to obtain consistent information; they are particularly remiss in providing feedback reports on follow-up measures. As a result, schools and institutions sometimes wonder why they bothered reporting absences. When schools fail to report absences or early school leaving, when they provide incomplete information or do not report in time, it takes more time to trace the young people concerned and guide them back into the education system. The government has taken a number of measures aimed at improving the chain structure.

2.5 Accessibility of higher education

The number of people with a degree in higher education is growing The number of people in the Dutch population with a degree in higher education is growing. In 1991, 18 percent of 25 to 75-year-olds had completed a programme in higher professional education or at university. In 2005 this percentage was 27 percent. In 2007, according to a study conducted by Statistics Netherlands (CBS), this figure had risen once more to 28 percent. Last year the accessibility of higher education increased once again. This is due, among other things, to the fact that more students are obtaining a diploma in higher general secondary education and pre-university education.

The participation in higher education among students from ethnic minorities, however, is still lagging behind. Over half the native Dutch population of young people follow a programme in higher education against only one-third of Turkish and Moroccan young people.

Participation in science and technology programmes is not rising enough to fulfil the ambitions of the Dutch knowledge economy.

Dropping out The increased participation in higher education, however, is overshadowed by the drop-out rate among students. Of the students who entered a higher edu-

cation programme in 2004, only just over half were still following the same programme at the same institution two years later. Approximately one in five students switches (either programme or institution) or starts again after an absence of over a year. After two years, almost one-quarter of first-year students in higher professional education and 22 percent of first-year students at universities has dropped out of their original programme or out of another higher education programme.

Quality risks Accreditation of study programmes (instead of inspection) serves as a guarantee for basic quality in higher education. Due to the strong focus of the accreditation system on assessing generic quality, it is almost impossible to trace quality risks at the national level. There were clear indications of too limited real teaching hours and although there are almost no subjects listed on the timetable that are not actually taught, every now and then we see cases of students receiving a passing mark although they made little effort to earn it. These are indications of the lack of weight in the programmes concerned. There are thus reasons to intensify higher education. This means, apart from introducing more hours of real teaching, ensuring better guidance counselling and an improvement in testing. Institutions are already working on this. Their efforts will increase motivation and enthusiasm among students, which will prevent them from dropping out.

2.6 Change

Fewer school leavers in 2012 Although the number of young people without basic qualifications for the labour market that left the education system in the school years 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 was lower than in 2002, the figure was still too high: 53,100 in 2006/2007. The government would therefore like the number of new early school leavers to be halved by 2012. This means that no more than 35,000 young people would enter the labour market without basic qualifications. In 2002 the figure was 71,000.

Preventing dropping out Not only the municipalities, unemployment centres, care institutions and the regional business community can contribute to preventing early school leaving, but certainly the schools themselves can. Particularly important measures include flexible transfers between types of education, keeping students in the classroom and sound guidance for practical training. In addition: the continuation of making agreements with the RMCs about the reduction of the number of early school leavers and about measures that schools and the RMCs can take in this regard. At the end of March 2008, the government presented a memorandum about working on craftsmanship. This document listed activities aimed at increasing the social yield of vocational education for students and the labour market.

3 Teachers make the difference

Teachers The Inspectorate investigated what the differences are between schools with and without low-achieving students and between schools with many and few early school leavers.

It turns out that schools with few low-achieving students are distinguished by the following:

- the complete subject matter for language and maths is offered to all students;
- the learning and instruction time is dealt with efficiently;
- teaching is carried out in a good, task-oriented working atmosphere, the subject matter is explained well and students are involved in the lessons;
- the different educational needs of the students are taken into account when teaching and processing the subject matter;
- care is taken of students who are lagging behind (by using national standardised tests to determine what these students need, and implementing the care according to a plan and evaluating the plan);
- proper evaluation at the school level of the performances of students and drawing conclusions for classroom teaching.

In preventing early school leaving, the role of teachers is important too. At schools with few early school leavers the teachers:

- better harmonise the subject matter with the educational needs of their students;
- take more care to assure the quality of classroom teaching/learning;
- create a school climate that is marked by mutual respect.

Needless to say, teachers are not only important in a pedagogic-didactic sense, their knowledge of subject matter is of crucial importance too, right from the outset at primary schools.

Mathematical skills of Primary School Teacher-Training College students It is worrying, therefore, that a publication in 2005 showed that the mathematical skills of Primary School Teacher-Training College (PABO) students are inadequate. At that time, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO-raad) conducted an exhaustive study into the matter and discovered that one-quarter of the students who entered the first year of Primary School Teacher-Training College in 2006, failed the maths test. Half of them failed the language test. At the end of the first year of the programme, one in eight first-year students were obliged to leave their course because they had still not passed the maths or language test after two resits. Especially students from secondary vocational education who transfer to Primary School Teacher-Training College score unsatisfactorily. Research by the Inspectorate has shown that a number of secondary vocational education programmes for assistant teachers are now taking this matter very seriously and are tackling it with success.

3.1 Shortage of teachers

Shortage of teachers If no measures are taken, the ageing population of teachers will lead to an imminent shortage of teachers by 2010. In the secondary education sector,

a shortage of 3,300 teachers is expected by 2011. In the primary education sector, a shortage of five hundred principals is expected in that year. In the secondary vocational education sector, the demand for new teachers will mount to 1,860 in 2010.

Action plan The “Teachers Committee” chaired by Rinnooy Kan delivered a recommendation in 2007 aimed at combating the quantitative (and qualitative) shortage of teachers. This recommendation has now been elaborated into an action plan, for which a sum of 1.1 billion euros has been made available up to 2020. This action plan aims to enable teachers to provide better education and to enhance the appreciation of the teaching profession. Teachers will not only receive better payment (with a strong emphasis on training and performance) and have improved career prospects, their position within their schools will also become stronger. In the months ahead, performance agreements will be made with the social partners. In addition, agreements will be drawn up between the schools and the Minister, in co-operation with teacher training programmes. As in previous years, the Inspectorate explicitly emphasises the importance of good teachers for Dutch education.

4 Under-performing schools and schools at risk

The number of students with inadequate basic skills is growing and the drop-out rate among students is still too high. To a significant degree, this is due to under-performing schools and schools at which students run an increased risk of encountering problems in their school careers. In the agreements between the primary and secondary education sectors and the Minister, various measures have been proposed aimed at reducing both the number of under-performing schools and the number of schools at risk.

4.1 Under-performing schools

Under-performing schools An under-performing school is defined as a school that realises unsatisfactory educational outcomes and, in addition, demonstrates insufficient quality in crucial elements of classroom teaching. On the reference date of 1 January 2008, a total of 166 schools were deemed under-performing. This figure breaks down into 96 primary schools, 21 special primary schools, 17 centres for special education, 1 regional centre for special education with two locations and 31 secondary schools including one centre for special education.

Special supervision scheme These schools fall under a special supervision scheme. An under-performing school receives a maximum of two years to raise its quality to an acceptable level. During this improvement phase the Inspectorate supervises the school intensively. After this phase, the Inspectorate assesses the outcomes of the quality improvement in a closing study. If the quality of the education provided has not improved, the Minister will decide what actions should be taken with regard to the school concerned.

4.2 Schools at risk

The under-performing schools belong to a larger group of schools at which students run an increased risk of encountering problems in their school careers.

Primary education Students at nearly one-quarter of primary schools run an increased risk of encountering one or more risks in their school careers. These risks may be performance-related, with performance during the primary school period already being below the level that can be expected (taking the background of the students into account). When performance is measured at different times during primary education, this risk is seen at 9 percent of primary schools. All together, the average student is performing below his or her expected level at the end of primary school at 5 percent of primary schools. Other risks for students include an increased risk of repeating a year (6 percent), transferring to special primary education or to a centre for special education (9 percent) or an increased risk of being confronted with incidents of violence (5 percent).

Primary schools at which the school careers of students entail more risks, often have more (ethnic-minority) students with disadvantages and they are often found in large

cities and in deprived areas. These schools face more mobility among teachers, more unfilled job vacancies, more absence due to illness among teachers and have more unqualified teachers in charge of a class. Even when these background circumstances are taken into account, the students at these schools cannot attain the learning targets with the subject matter available, and the teaching more often fails to meet the basic requirements (clear explanations, good class management and keeping the students involved in the lessons). Furthermore, the education provided is less well geared to the students' needs, and the care provided for students who are lagging behind does not meet the relevant requirements. Last but not least, the quality of the school climate is sub-standard at these schools.

Special primary education Last year the Inspectorate determined that half the schools for special primary education needed to be placed under some form of intensive supervision. In the course of 2008, the Inspectorate will publish an exhaustive report on these schools, but it can already report that at some 30 percent of these schools all the students now have now development prospects that can be adjusted based on their development.

Special education Last year, the Inspectorate placed over 60 percent of the institutions for special education under a form of special supervision. This year's data show that the quality at over half of the institutions is still causing concern or is unsatisfactory. The gravest concerns pertain to schools for students with behavioural problems.

Secondary education In the secondary education sector, students at one-quarter of the schools run an increased risk of encountering problems during their school careers. At 6 percent of the schools this increased risk involves the chances of scoring unsatisfactorily in the central exam. It may further involve the risk of repeating a year, or transferring to a lower type of education (14 percent), leaving school early (9 percent) or being confronted with incidents of violence (10 percent). At such schools, the quality of the subject matter, the teaching, the harmonisation of the education with the differences between students and the teaching climate are weaker than elsewhere. These schools often have more students from ethnic-minority backgrounds and are often located in large cities and deprived areas. Moreover, there is more mobility among teachers, absence due to illness is higher and more often unqualified (and younger) teachers are in charge of classes.

Even if corrections are made to take into account the circumstances of the school and staff, the quality of the subject matter and the teaching at schools with more risks are below the national level.

Vocational and adult education In the secondary vocational education sector, the conversion to risk-driven supervision has been completed. In the 2006/2007 school year, the inspectorate has carried out risk analyses at all publicly funded institutions. At 55 percent of them (40 institutions; 219 organic units) the quality analyses were so close to completion that they could be used in this Education Report. The risk analyses resulted in a quality analysis at one-quarter of the units (57). 46 of the 57 units showed unsatisfactory quality. That is 21 percent of the total number of 219 units. As a result of a different system and more stringent standardisation in the new frame of reference, this picture deviates from that of previous years.

5 Formal annual load

Observance of education laws The supervision with which the Inspectorate of Education is charged, does not only comprise assessing the quality of education but also investigating the observance of education laws. In the past year, a great deal of attention was devoted to the observance of the statutory compulsory formal annual load, particularly in the secondary education sector.

Standard number of hours Recently, there has been an ongoing discussion regarding the feasibility of the statutory compulsory formal annual load in the secondary education sector. The Inspectorate has regularly devoted attention to this issue in its education reports. It has also pointed out problems with the enforceability and observance of the norms in the secondary education sector. In 2007, the Inspectorate noted that 43 percent of schools could not account for their realised annual load, while only 5 of the 76 schools investigated had completely satisfied the statutory requirements.

Structure of the formal annual load In determining the standards for the formal annual load, it is important to focus on a central objective: students spending as much time as possible on the subjects to be studied. Not only the amount of time in the formal annual load is important, but especially the way in which this time is spent. In 2007 students in senior secondary vocational education, higher professional education and secondary education protested against the formal annual load. A comparison between the sectors shows distinct differences. Students in senior secondary vocational education and higher professional education complained that the annual load was not high enough, resulting in inadequate guidance counselling (and therefore a lack of focused work on the themes to be taught). In secondary education, the students complained about cancelled lessons (with the result that some subjects were not taught sufficiently), but also about the hours with no structural guidance ("cooped-up hours"). In senior secondary vocational education, unlike in secondary education, there was no national discussion regarding the current minimum requirement for the formal annual load, which is now 850 hours.

Support base In light of the importance of teaching time for the quality of education, the Inspectorate supports the setting of a statutory minimum requirement. Schools would then have to realise a specific number of teaching hours. These requirements need to have a support base. The Inspectorate assumes that the discussion about the formal annual load will be finalised soon after the recommendation of the Minister and the political decision-making regarding this matter. The emphasis in the supervision of the annual load can then again be placed on evaluating the efficient use of the annual load and on investigating whether cancellations of scheduled educational activities and unauthorised absences of students remain limited. This is important in two ways: first, these indicators for the efficient use of the annual load are linked to a decrease in retention rates, a decrease in transfers to lower types of education and higher marks in central exams. Second, the efficient use of the annual load probably contributes to preventing truancy and early school leaving.

6 Conclusion

Education in the news In the past year, there was not only heated discussion in the Dutch media regarding the formal annual load. The quality of education also received a great deal of publicity, in various ways and from different perspectives. At the end of 2007, the international comparative PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) reports were published; in early 2008 the report of the national testing service (CITO) on maths and language goals was published; and shortly thereafter the media focused its attention on a report about educational innovation by a parliamentary research committee. The picture that emerged from these reports was anything but rose-coloured. Although the Inspectorate does not dispute the main conclusions of the respective reports, they need to be taken in context and with the necessary nuances.

The quality of education is definitely satisfactory The Inspectorate concludes that the quality of education can definitely be called satisfactory at the majority of educational institutions in the Netherlands. Students are performing to their capacities and potential. At the majority of institutions under-performance, low-achieving, repeating years, transferring to lower types of education, early school leaving and incidents involving safety only occur to a limited degree.

High level Regarding the primary education sector, the quality of the subject matter and the efficient use of the learning and teaching time have clearly improved over the past years, and have reached a high level. The generic quality of the teaching (clear explanations, good class management and retaining student involvement) is high. In the secondary education sector, the quality of the subject matter has improved. Currently, the subject matter meets the statutory requirements at nearly all schools: it is sufficient to cover the exam requirements. Three-quarters of the organic units in the vocational education sector is highly accessible for participants with a low educational background and the yield is good. This year, once again, a greater number of young people gained access to higher education.

International The good performances of the Dutch education system are also reflected in international comparative studies. These show that the average Dutch student still performs better in terms of basic skills than his/her peers in neighbouring countries, although this does not imply that there are no students with weak and unsatisfactory skills in maths and language.

Varying results How can we tackle the problem of students who are lagging behind and students who are in danger of dropping out? The most important conclusion is that the degree to which schools and teachers devote attention to these problems varies significantly. Consequently, the results of schools also vary considerably. In the year ahead, inspectors will particularly focus on the measures that schools take to retain more students in the education system and to provide them with a proper education. This specifically involves achieving the aim of more students reaching a higher level in terms of basic maths and language skills.



The Inspector General of Education,
Mrs. drs. A.S. Roeters

Colophon

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