



Inspectorate of Education  
Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

Summary report

# The State of Education

2016-2017



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2017

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# Foreword

Each year we take a snapshot of education in the Netherlands for the report *The State of Education*. Overall, that image is still a positive one. In general, Dutch pupils complete their school careers with a good education. And most graduates of further and higher education quickly find a job appropriate to their qualifications. Compared with other countries, Dutch education is extremely well-adapted to the nation's labour market. While the current buoyant state of the economy is partly responsible for this, most of the credit goes to our vocational education.

In recent years we have done more than just take an annual snapshot, however; we have also put together a film. And that long view paints a rather different picture. Over the past two decades, the average performance of Dutch schoolchildren has been declining gradually. We saw that last year in international studies, and this year it is also apparent in the national data. The most talented pupils, in particular, are not reaching their full potential. And the number leaving primary school unable to read properly has risen in the past two years. In physical education, cultural education and nature and technology, too, achievements are generally worse than they were a few years ago. Previous reports have noted insufficient progress in citizenship and social skills, too. Overall, then, we are forced to conclude that the long-term performance of the Dutch education system is slipping. I am truly concerned about this.

## Opportunities, choices and segregation

We have also observed increasing inequality of opportunity in recent years, with the emergence of major differences in quality between schools. Many interested parties are working visibly to create more equal opportunities, which is of course a good thing, and so there is some light at the end of the tunnel. For example, primary-school streaming recommendations for the next stage of pupils' education now reflect objective test results, more pupils are receiving dual recommendations and it is becoming easier to combine school qualifications. All of these developments benefit pupils.

But we also see trends likely to further encourage inequality of opportunity. Above all, there is increasing social and economic segregation within the school system. Well-educated parents, in particular, are isolating their children from other groups in society through their choice of school; specifically by opting for those offering distinctive educational concepts, those populated only by pupils with a similar background or private ones. There is also ethnic segregation, caused primarily by parents choosing small faith schools for their children. By comparison with other countries, Dutch education is highly segregated.

In the choice of educational stream, track, profile and subjects, too, we are seeing groups of pupils being shepherded into clusters with the same level of

parental education, ethnic origin or gender. Within Dutch education, homogeneous “bubbles” are now forming – islands of the like-minded from which pupils rarely break out. Not only is the desirability of this trend questionable from the perspective of building a healthy society, but within the foreseeable future it could also have real consequences for the educational opportunities available to certain groups and for the quality of education as a whole. For the time being, increasing segmentation and waning performance remain separate phenomena: disparity of choice does not yet necessarily mean disparity of opportunity. But that is in danger of changing. For example, schools with more challenging pupil populations are already more likely to be troubled by the ever more acute shortage of teachers in some geographical areas.

### Who upholds the social mission?

Our “film” of education thus reveals a rather more worrying image than the latest snapshot. And it raises a question. Education has a social mission, to help promote community cohesion, general well-being, economic growth and national prosperity, but who takes charge if that mission comes under pressure? The more autonomy an educational system allows, as it does in the Netherlands, the greater the challenge of upholding its social mission.

The centre of gravity in Dutch education is positioned quite unusually, with schools and their governing bodies enjoying a high degree of autonomy and central government control relatively limited. This equilibrium can be maintained as long as schools and governors make the most of their autonomous position, as long as there is general consensus about the core mission of education and as long as the government provides a framework that is clear in its guidance. In practice, however, the situation is now precarious. Schools and governing bodies do not always feel as autonomous as they should, and they do not always make optimum use of their autonomy. On the other side of the coin, government intervention is usually open and hence regularly without obligations, creating a stack of one demand after another, and often focuses on instruments or predetermined solutions rather than desired results. Meanwhile, the debate around education is polarizing, as is that about the supposed lack of accountability for it, so that in the end no-one is satisfied with the outcome. In this way we are collectively making our educational system more and more complicated, even as its performance is falling short and we are losing talent.

### Three challenges: consensus about the basics, exploiting autonomy and upholding the social mission

We see three challenges requiring new agreements. First, the time seems to have come for greater consensus about which basics in education really do have to be put right. Of course there are already learning objectives, core targets and final examinations, and in certain respects these provide schools and courses with a frame of reference, but they also allow so much freedom in shaping provision that we actually lack a shared picture of what constitutes “good” education. Everyone chooses their own emphasis. While that is fine in itself, because it allows pupils and students to select the form of education which best suits them, at the same time it leaves desired social outcomes unmentioned and so unachieved.

Without consensus as to what good education is, it is hard to aim for desirable results. Take literacy and numeracy attainment targets, for instance: schools know what they are, but very few act on them. As a result, we are not currently achieving our nationally formulated objectives. Pupils continue to leave school with literacy and numeracy deficiencies. And yet, remarkably, that is failing to ring alarm bells. Similarly, in citizenship education there have been concerns for years about the level of knowledge and skills being acquired by pupils and students, but still there is no clear, widely shared educational mission in this area.

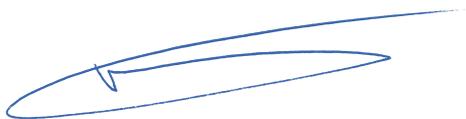
The second challenge is one for teaching teams, school leaders and governors: how to make better use of their autonomy. After all, as many schools and degree programmes already demonstrate, that can result in fantastic education. But with autonomy also comes enormous responsibility; it is certainly not an alibi for lack of commitment. At some schools and on some courses we encounter teachers forced to design their lessons within missing, inadequate or constantly changing scholastic frameworks. This induces professional reticence, a feeling that the teacher can never do things right and the feeling that they are being overworked. School leaders and governors can do a lot to overcome these perceptions by, for example, introducing focus, supporting teams and making sure that the professionals for whom they are responsible are able to develop and to learn from one another. At the national level, professional organizations and their members can take greater collective responsibility for results in such areas as innovation and educational quality, as well as for the sector’s social mission. We already see some good examples of this in vocational further education.

The third challenge, and perhaps the greatest in our system, is upholding education's social mission to work in the collective interest. Increasing inequality, major disparities between schools and the high degree of segregation show that the collective interest is all too easily subordinated to individual or organized group interests. There are still many children in the Netherlands temporarily not receiving any form of formal schooling, problems with the labour market or shrinking communities are regularly left to the market to solve and it is up to the local authority where you happen to live to determine what additional educational support provision you are entitled to receive.

Fortunately, there are also plenty of initiatives designed to promote greater collaboration at various levels, including locally, regionally and interinstitutionally. Some of these appear to be effective, such as the programme to prevent premature school-leaving, but in other cases it is proving hard to build the impetus and momentum needed to reduce reliance on the good will of individual governing bodies or parents and to maintain the right balance between public and personal interests.

### Looking for a new equilibrium together

In this situation, who is going to take responsibility for the collective interest? The time has come to reset the balance between autonomy and control in the Dutch education system. To give this a solid basis, in future it should rest on a shared vision of what constitutes good education, optimum use of the autonomy available and firmly upholding the social mission of education. I realize that now is a difficult moment to raise this issue, with relationships within the world of Dutch education already strained by teacher shortages, pressure of work and funding debates. Are the prerequisites all still in order? And – perhaps crucially – since there are schools which are doing exceptionally well on every conceivable front, even under current circumstances, why are the rest not following their example?



Monique Vogelzang  
*Inspector-General of Education*

Utrecht, 11 April 2018

But let us not hide behind these specific questions as we would simply lose valuable time.. There are broader, more important questions which we need to answer collectively. How do we make sure that educational performances do not decline any further, and indeed that they improve where necessary, so that pupils are able to make the most of their talents? How do we reach consensus about the basics, those aspects of education which need be in order, complete with concrete objectives and explicit outcome targets. How do we prevent segregation and inequality further reinforcing one another? And how do we create the momentum needed at the regional, local and interinstitutional levels to maintain the right balance between education's social mission and individual interests?

In all this, we shall continue to look critically at our own role as the inspectorate of education in the Netherlands. With performance coming under such pressure, are we not being blinded by the many positive developments we see at schools and on individual degree programmes? And what is our task in upholding and strengthening the social mission of education?

Looking ahead, a variety of topics are set to dominate the Dutch education agenda in the near future. They include curriculum reform, space for new schools, strengthening accountability and enforcing quality agreements. We can then reach consensus about the results we aspire to, about clear role divisions and about giving the sector's professionals the space and support they need.

Our snapshot of the 2016-2017 school year shows that education in the Netherlands is in a good state. But the longer "film" reveals that we should not be satisfied – essential aspects of the system face real difficulties. We therefore need to act now so that we can continue to provide all our pupils and students with the best start in life in the long term.





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# 1 Educational attainment of pupils and students

**Performance under pressure** • Overall, the performance of Dutch pupils in compulsory schooling is stable or lower. In previous years we observed long-term declines in numeracy, mathematics and nature education; this year it is apparent that pupils literacy is also once again lower than it was 15-20 years ago. Because pupil performance in virtually every other country has improved in recent years, the Netherlands is gradually losing its leading international position. Other national data confirms this picture. For example, primary-school pupils were less good at reading in 2017 than in 2016 and 2015. Performances at primary level in cultural education, nature and technology and physical education, too, are the same or lower than they were a decade ago.

**Civic knowledge and disposition relatively limited** • The civic disposition of Dutch secondary-school pupils is relatively underdeveloped, and they also have less civic knowledge than their peers in neighbouring countries. Although that knowledge has improved somewhat, it has not done so as fast as in those other territories. Moreover, the improvement is confined primarily to the more academic forms of secondary schooling (HAVO and VWO). As a result, the gap in knowledge with pupils in vocational (VMBO) streams has widened. Also striking is the wide disparity in civic knowledge between schools.

**Qualification levels rising only in vocational schooling** • The Dutch population is relatively well-educated, with a substantial proportion holding degrees. The number of academic (WO) graduates, in particular, has increased sharply in recent decades. In 2017, however, only pupils and students in vocational education, both secondary VMBO and tertiary MBO, were more likely than before to obtain a higher qualification: a “combined/theoretical” (rather than “basic”) VMBO-G/T or a Level 4 MBO. In other streams, the long-term general improvement has stalled. In fact, the average level of final school qualifications has fallen slightly. A proportion of students in higher education, both vocational HBO and academic WO, drop out before graduating.

**Low youth unemployment** • At the end of their educational careers, Dutch youngsters are in a strong position in the jobs market. The great majority of those with an MBO qualification or a degree (HBO or WO) find work relatively quickly. Compared with other European countries, very few young people in the Netherlands are unemployed (Cedefop, 2017). However, employment prospects do vary widely from sector to sector. For young people with the right qualifications, jobs are easy to find in those suffering staff shortages, such as technology, education and healthcare. But the outlook is rather less good for those with a background in economics or culture. The number of young people working on flexible contracts is increasing, as is the number in a job not directly related to their previous studies (so-called “horizontal mismatches”).

## 1.1 Performance at school

### Primary education

**Literacy stable or falling since 2001** • According to an international study of reading ability (Gubbels, Netten and Verhoeven, 2017), the literacy of Dutch primary-school pupils has again fallen compared with twenty years ago. And because this ability improved in most countries, the Netherlands is no longer in a leading position internationally. Above all, there are fewer and fewer high-performing children. This echoes a long-term trend also seen in numeracy, mathematics and science, as revealed by international studies such as PISA and TIMSS (see also Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017d). Also striking is how little pleasure Dutch children take in reading: in none of the fifty countries surveyed was it enjoyed less. Moreover, literacy levels vary widely from school to school, even when they have comparable pupil populations (Gubbels, Netten and Verhoeven, 2017).

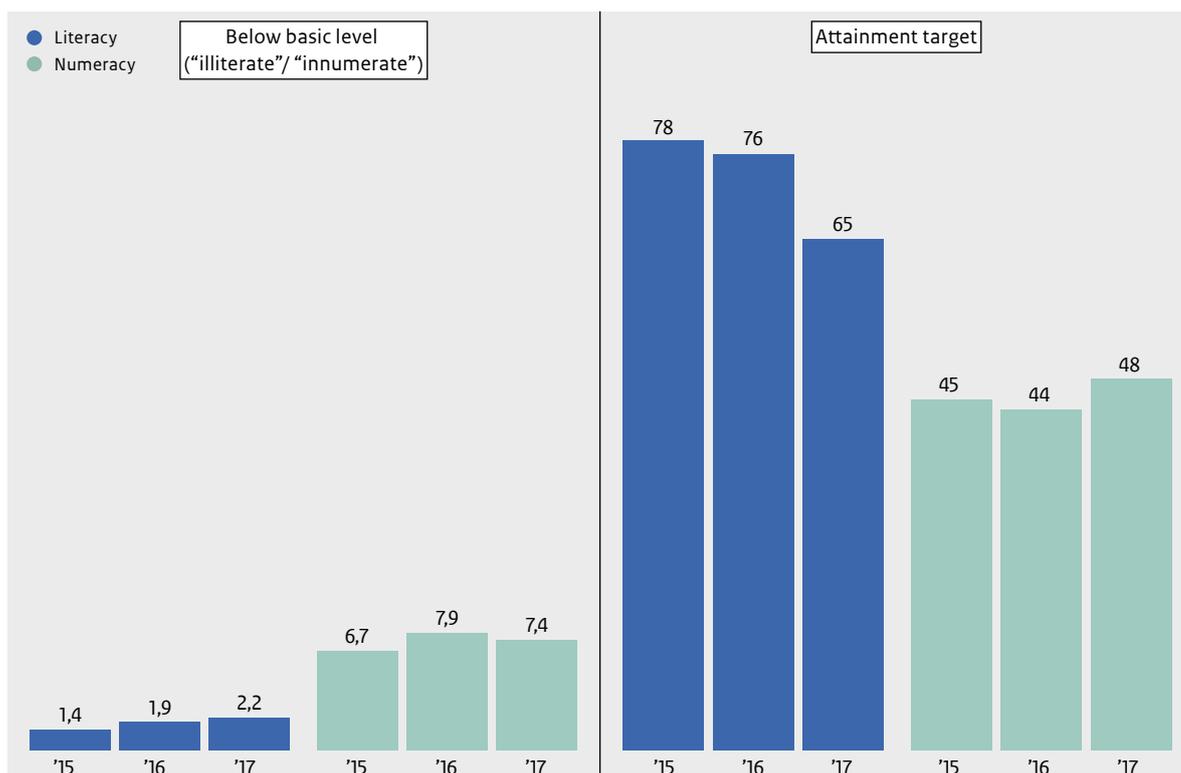
### Fewer pupils reaching literacy attainment targets

Far fewer pupils leaving primary school in 2017 had reached the literacy attainment targets for that milestone (see also Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2018a). The attainment rate fell by almost 10 percentage points, to 65 per cent (see figure 1.1), with the decline more marked amongst boys than girls. Moreover, the proportion of primary-school leavers officially classified as “illiterate” increased from less than 1.4 per cent in 2015 to 2.2 per cent in 2017. Numerically, that represents some 3500 children who lack even basic reading ability.

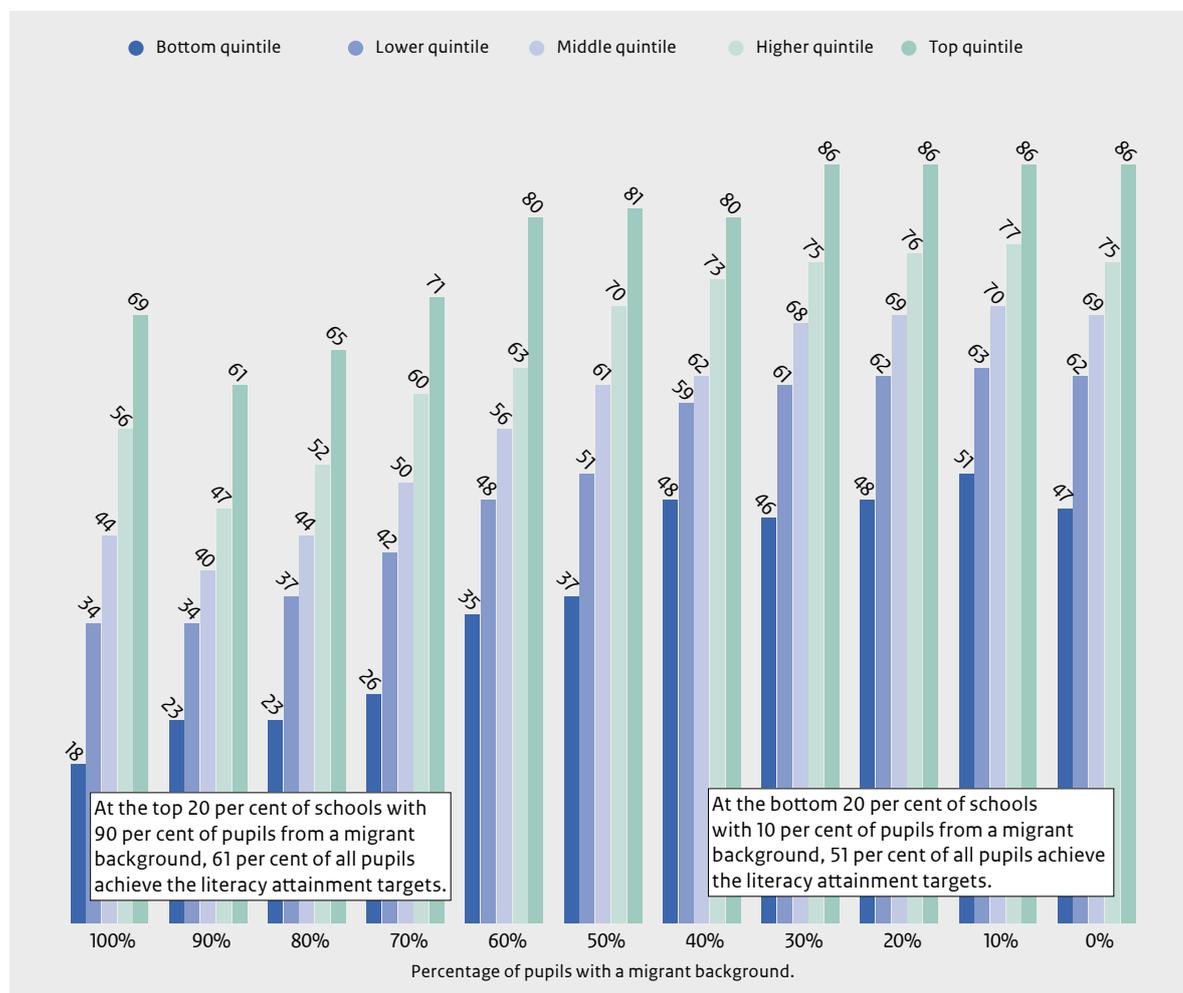
### Major discrepancies between schools

Dutch primary schools vary considerably in the percentages of pupils achieving the literacy attainment targets. At those without pupils with a migrant background, the proportion reaching the literacy attainment target ranged widely, between 47 and 86 per cent (top and bottom quintiles; see figure 1.2). The same applies to schools where all pupils have a migrant background, with the range here 18-69 per cent (top and bottom quintiles). A similar discrepancy is apparent in numeracy outcomes.

**Figure 1.1** Percentages of pupils achieving literacy and numeracy attainment targets, 2015-2017.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

**Figure 1.2** Percentages of pupils achieving literacy attainment targets, 2017, by school's proportion of pupils with a migrant background.

Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

**Numeracy rates better, but still low** • Numeracy outcomes in primary education are also lagging behind (figure 1.1). Seven per cent of leavers in 2017 were officially classified as “innumerate”, and less than half had reached the numeracy attainment targets. These rates fluctuate from year to year, but seem fairly stable. And again there are huge variations between schools, even when they have comparable pupil populations.

**Other primary outcomes also under pressure** • It is not just in literacy and numeracy that outcomes in primary education are under pressure. In aspects of physical education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2018b), cultural education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017b) and nature and technology (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017c), too, we see more regression than progression. Here again, the sector appears unable to achieve consistent improvement.

## Secondary education

**Long-term decline in performance** • The international PISA study revealed last year that overall pupil performance in Dutch secondary education has been declining for some considerable time (Feskens, Kuhlemeier and Limpens, 2016; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017d): they are not performing at the same level as their predecessors in 2003 and 2006. Despite minor fluctuations, the trend over the past two decades has been consistently downward. And this has been most severe in mathematics and science. Literacy has also been falling, although not quite as fast. In particular, there are fewer “high performers”: the proportion of pupils in this category in mathematics, for example, dropped from 50 per cent in 1995 to 37 per cent in 2015. Internationally, the Netherlands has lost its leading position in terms of performance in secondary education; it is now in the “second tier”.

**No clear decline in examination results** • The decline in performance described above is not reflected in analyses of the results of final school examinations. The overall pass rate in 2017 was slightly lower than in the two previous years, and there was a particularly sharp and unexpected fall in average marks for mathematics, but the fluctuations observed over a period of several years mean that it is too early to draw any definitive conclusions from this.

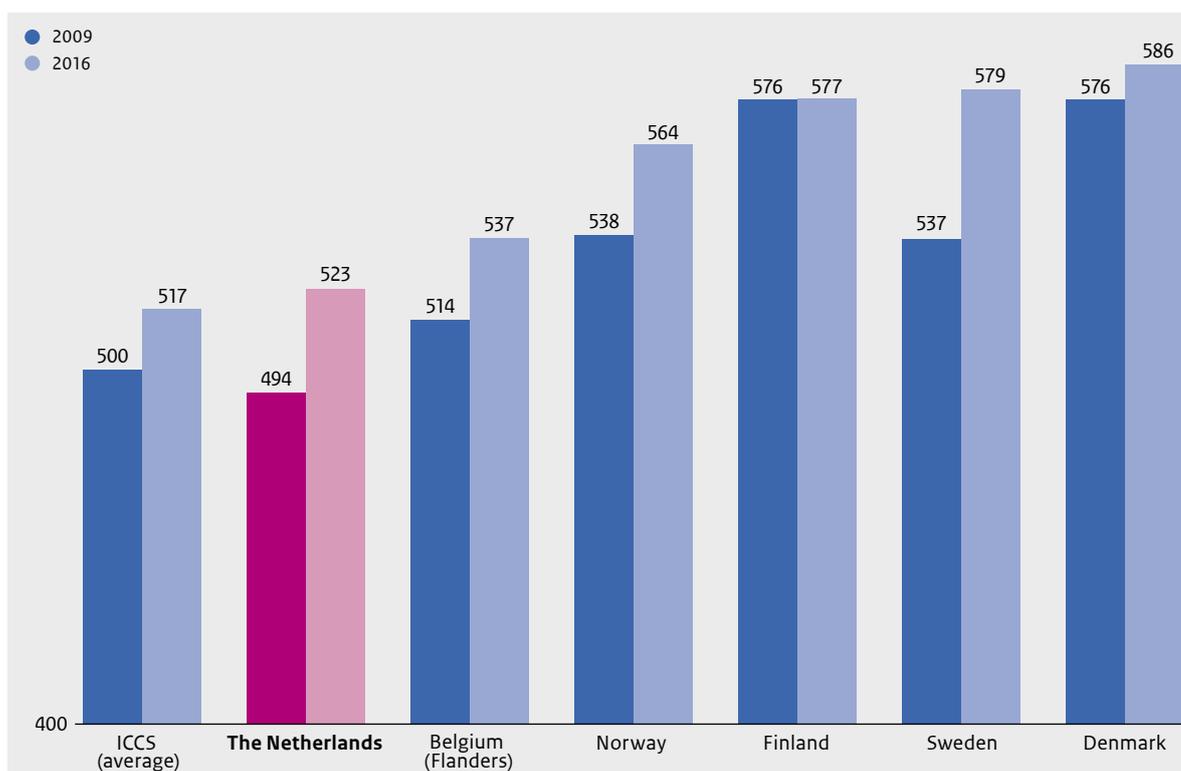
**Major discrepancies between schools** • As at primary level, Dutch secondary schools vary considerably in terms of overall pupil performance. These discrepancies extend across a range of benchmarks: examination results and pass rates, progression (to the next school year) and retention (repeating a year) rates, upgrading and downgrading (to a different track or form of schooling) rates and performance in compulsory arithmetic tests. To a very limited extent they correlate with differences between pupil populations in terms of form of schooling and parental characteristics, but there are still major differences between schools with comparable populations. In other words, even two schools where most parents are graduates – or two where the majority have only basic qualifications – may vary substantially when it comes to the benchmarks

listed above: at both ends of the scale we find schools with very poor pupil performances. The precise causes of these discrepancies remain unknown, but our inspectors have the impression that they are associated in part with school policies, the curriculum and emphases within it, the quality of lessons, the provision of additional support and pupil motivation and expectations. In other words, factors closely associated with the quality of teaching staff and school leaders, the choices they make and methods they adopt.

**Lack of pupil motivation** • Dutch pupils are less motivated to learn than their peers in many other countries. Indeed, motivation amongst 14-year-olds is amongst the lowest in the world (OECD, 2016). This does not mean that our children are unhappy or do not like going to school, however. In fact, in few other countries are they happier or do they enjoy school more.

**Lack of civic competences** • Recent international research into the civic competences of pupils in their second year of secondary education (ICCS, 2016) shows that knowledge, skills and disposition in this area leave much to be desired in the Netherlands (Munniksmas, Dijkstra, Van der Veen, Ledoux, Van de Werfhorst and

**Figure 1.3** Average civic knowledge in the Netherlands, compared with international average and comparable countries.



Source: Munniksmas et al., 2017; ICCS, 2016.

Ten Dam, 2017; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, Agrusti and Friedman, 2017). Dutch pupils score close to the overall average for all the countries surveyed, but behind their peers in comparable nations – that is, those found alongside the Netherlands in the highest category of the Human Development Index. A similar comparative study, conducted in 2009, came to much the same conclusion (Maslowski, Van de Werf, Oonk, Naayer and Isac, 2012). A closer look at both reports reveals that levels of pupils' civic knowledge in the Netherlands did actually increase between 2009 and 2016, but the same was true in the other countries and so we continue to lag behind them (figure 1.3).

**More pupils with more civic knowledge, and more with less** • The term “civic knowledge” encompasses understanding of how our society and its democracy work (for example, the parliamentary system and how decisions are made), of their underlying values (such as equality in all its forms), of the practicalities involved (such as elections) and so on. One in three Dutch schoolchildren know a lot about all this, which is a high proportion by international standards, but a relatively large number have little such knowledge: a third are in the two lowest-scoring categories. That, too, is a high proportion compared with other countries. In short, levels of civic knowledge in the Netherlands vary far more widely than elsewhere. This is partly down to home background, with a significant correlation with parental educational qualifications. There are also differences between pupils with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds, although these are actually less marked than in other countries.

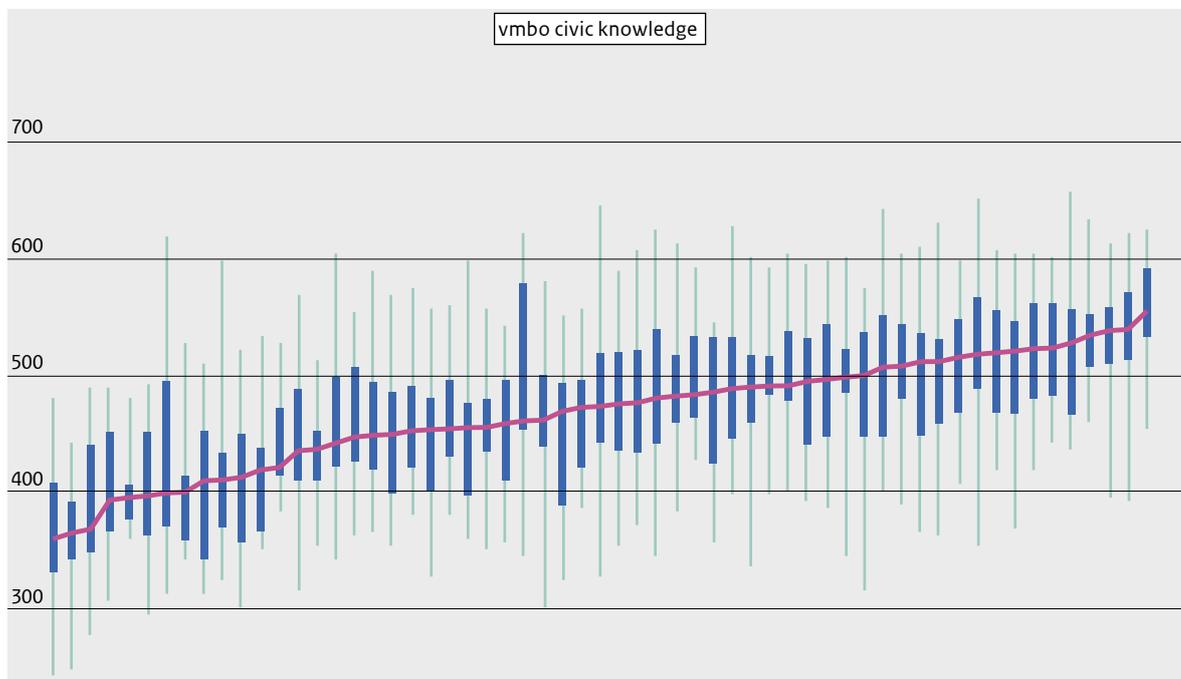
**Civic knowledge varies by form of schooling** • Pupils in vocational (VMBO) schooling possess less civic knowledge than those in the more academic forms (HAVO and VWO). Moreover, the improvement observed since 2009 is confined exclusively to the latter streams. This means that the gap in knowledge between the different forms of schooling has widened.

**Civic disposition and views of equal rights** • For Dutch pupils, the most important aspect of citizenship is “the right to have your own opinion”. Others, such as obeying the law, helping others, working hard and

protecting the environment are less important than they are for their peers in other countries. The same applies to the importance of elections, following politics, awareness of national history and “social engagement” (such as campaigning for human rights). Most pupils in the Netherlands (89 per cent) believe that men and women should have equal rights, and the same applies to rights for different ethnic groups. In both respects, however, this support is lower than in comparable countries.

**Citizenship education is stagnating** • The Inspectorate of Education has reported previously that citizenship education is stagnating in all sectors where it is a compulsory part of the curriculum (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016a). That is, in primary, secondary, special and vocational further education. Although schools do consider it important to promote good citizenship, and they do indeed address it in the classroom, the quality of this instruction is in need of improvement. For example, it tends to be unsystematic and to lack clear learning objectives. In general, schools have little or no insight into what pupils are actually learning in this domain. The ICCS study (Munniksma et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2017) also shows that Dutch secondary schools pay relatively little attention to citizenship. And they confine themselves to a limited range of approaches, with a strong focus on textbooks, exercises and discussions of current affairs. Teachers in other countries are more varied in their approach (see chapter 3).

**Civic knowledge varies by school** • Disparities between pupils in terms of their civic knowledge are associated primarily with differences in home background, such as the socio-economic status of their parents. But the school itself is also a factor: levels of knowledge vary widely between them, too – more so than in any other country covered by the ICCS study. As in other domains, the differences are particularly stark between the various forms of schooling, but there are also relatively high degrees of variation between schools of the same type (figure 1.4). Civic knowledge is generally better at schools where parents have a higher average socio-economic status than where that is more modest.

**Figure 1.4** Average civic knowledge score and spread for second-year pupils at VMBO schools.

NB. Civic knowledge measured as per 2009 international standardization (mean score 500, SD 100); mean score of Dutch pupils in 2016: 523. Source: analysis of 2016 ICCS data for Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

## 1.2 Standards in further and higher education

### Many graduates, many unqualified adults •

By comparison with other European countries, within its active population (ages 15-75) the Netherlands has both a high proportion of graduates (WO and HBO, 29.7 per cent combined) and an above-average percentage of people with no basic qualifications (30.4 per cent). The latter have at most a VMBO school certificate or an admission diploma for MBO vocational training for those with no other formal school qualifications (CBS, DUO and OCW, 2018a). Once again, both of these percentages were higher in the Netherlands in 2016 than in other European countries.

### Upward trend in qualification levels apparently stalled •

As in other European countries, in recent decades the average level of the educational qualifications obtained by young adults in the Netherlands has risen steadily. In particular, the percentage of graduates in the 30-35 age group increased year on year, reaching 45.7 per cent in 2015. But that trend finally came to an end in 2016, with the proportion falling slightly to 44.9 per cent. This reversal is almost entirely a male phenomenon: the number of men aged 30-35 holding a

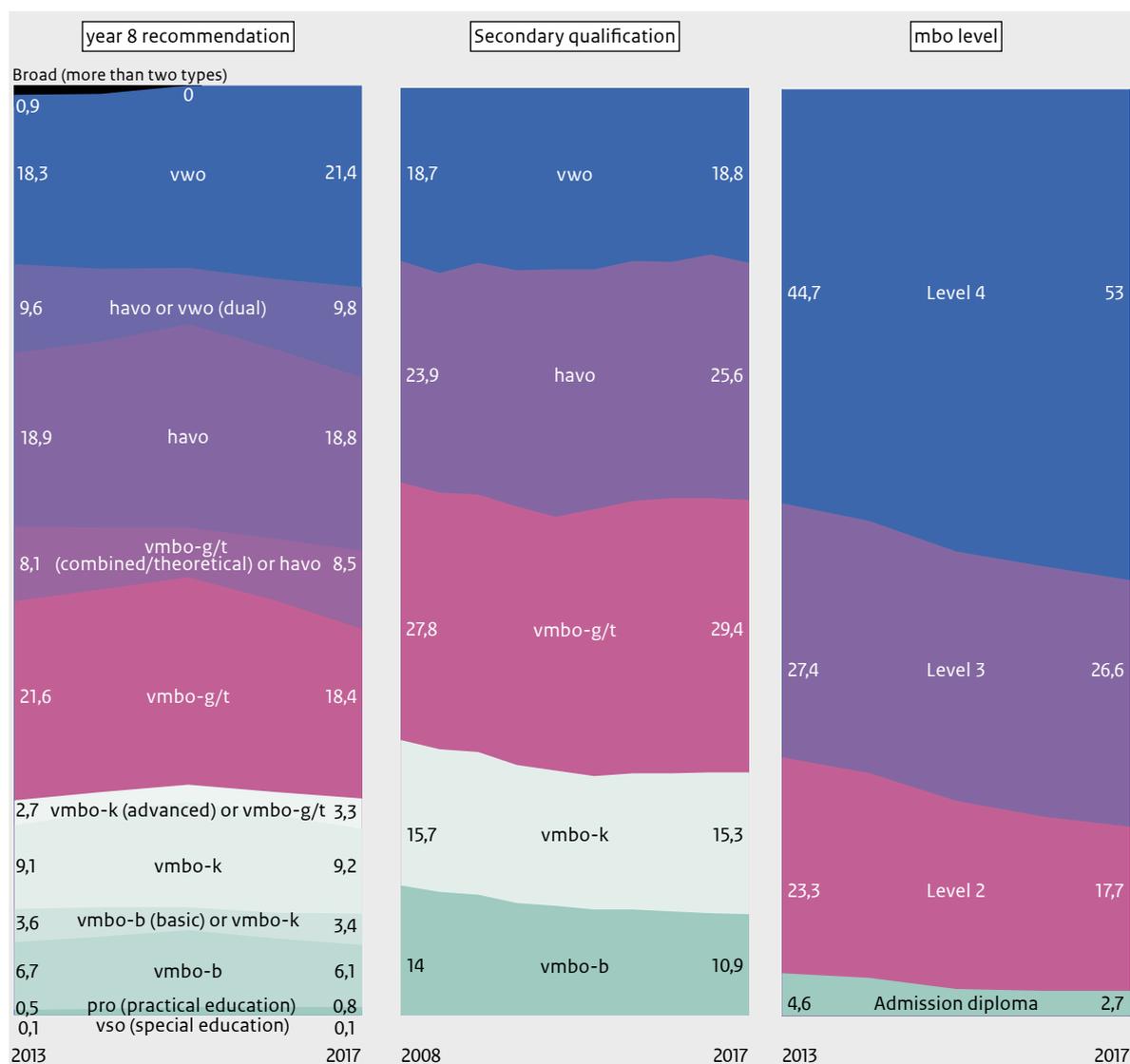
degree (WO or HBO) dropped from 42.5 per cent in 2015 to 41.0 per cent in 2016 (CBS, DUO and OCW, 2018a).

### More recommendations for academic secondary schooling •

In their final year at primary school (year 8), Dutch pupils are issued with a recommendation as to the type of secondary schooling they should enter. In some respects, we see a rise in the level of these recommendations; in particular, the proportion of pupils being advised to join pre-university (VWO) streams has been increasing steadily – from 18 per cent in 2013 to 21 per cent in 2017 (see figure 1.5a). Meanwhile, the number of “dual” recommendations (allowing a choice of schooling types) has increased in the past two years, having previously fallen slightly.

**More dual school qualifications •** The distribution of pupils across the various forms of secondary schooling has remained fairly stable in recent years (see figure 1.5b). However, there has been a steady increase in the proportion on the “combined/theoretical” vocational track (VMBO-G/T) and a concomitant decrease in the number on the “basic” track (VMBO-B). In the past two years, moreover, more so-called “diploma stackers” have gone on to obtain a second school qualification at a higher level than the first (CBS, DUO and OCW, 2018b; 2018c). In 2015/2016, for example, 15 per cent of those

**Figure 1.5** Percentages of pupils by type of secondary schooling (a) recommended in year 8 and (b) completed, and (c) of students by level in vocational further education (MBO).



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

passing VMBO-G/T went on to study for a HAVO degree, which provides admission to HBO vocational higher education (universities of applied science).

**Greater ambitions in vocational further education** •

More students are progressing to higher levels of vocational further education (MBO), with a growing number qualifying at Level 3 or 4 (see figure 1.5c). In the 2010/2011 academic year, fewer than a third achieved Level 4; by 2015/2016 that proportion had risen above 40 per cent. More than a third of those passing MBO Level 4 go on to study for a vocational degree (HBO).

**Not all degree students graduate** • In higher education, students change courses relatively frequently and

a substantial proportion do not graduate within four or five years. Quite a large number switch to a different subject or university during or at the end of their first year, or drop out altogether. Of those who do continue into their second year at a university of applied science (HBO), just under 60 per cent graduate within five years. At research universities (WO), the figure is 72 per cent within four years. The remainder either take longer to complete their studies, change course again, transfer to an MBO programme or leave education altogether. The WO graduation rate is a significant improvement over the situation ten years ago, when it was just 48 per cent within four years. Amongst HBO students, however, the trend has been in the opposite direction: a decade ago, 67 per cent of second-year students

obtained their degree within the next four years, dropping to 59 per cent in 2017. Although, on a positive note, the rate has risen in the past year.

### **Pupils in special education more likely to take school examinations, but prospects unchanged**

• More and more pupils in special education (VSO) are sitting examinations for school-leaving qualifications: 4782 in total in 2017, compared with 3113 four years ago. However, this increase has had no impact on what they do after they leave school.

## 1.3 Entering the jobs market

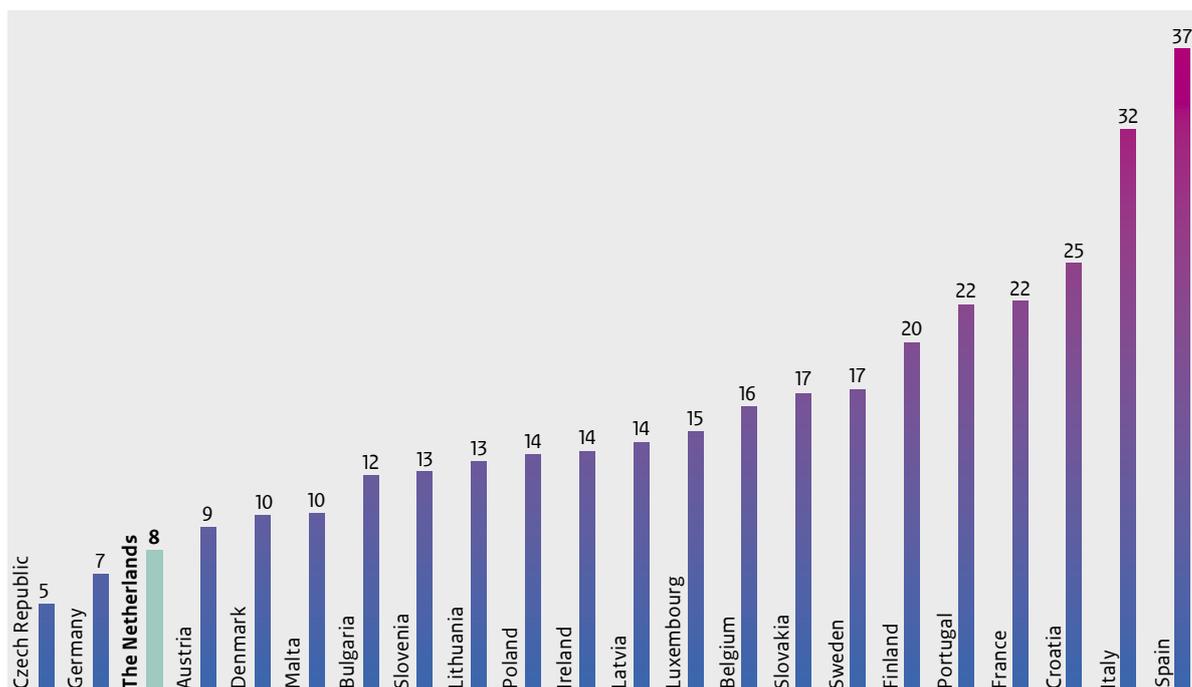
**Good employment prospects** • Young people entering the Dutch jobs market from school, college or university find work relatively quickly. Our youth unemployment rate is one of the lowest in Europe (see figure 1.6; Eurostat, 2018); in December 2017 it was below 10 per cent, behind only Germany and the Czech Republic.

**Ongoing improvement for qualified entrants** • For young people with an MBO qualification or a degree (HBO or WO), the employment situation continued to improve last year. Eighteen months after qualifying, only 2 per cent of those with an apprenticeship MBO (MBO-BBL) were out of work. For HBO graduates that

figure was 5 per cent, and for holders of both training MBOs (MBO-BOL) and WO degrees it was 7 per cent. (ROA, 2017; VSNU, 2016). Not only have all these rates fallen in the past two years, they are also low by comparison with other countries (Cedefop, 2017). And the great majority of these jobs are appropriate to the qualification obtained, although somewhat more so with an HBO (80 per cent) than an MBO (64 per cent for MBO-BBL, 55 per cent for MBO-BOL) (ROA, 2017).

**More horizontal mismatches** • It is not uncommon for well-qualified young people to work in a field for which they are not formally trained, so-called “horizontal mismatching”. Eighteen months after qualifying or graduating, almost one in three fall into this category. And this proportion has been increasing in recent years. However, mismatch rates vary considerably by the training received and are lower on average in the MBO-BBL segment. Mismatching indicates an imbalance between supply and demand (ROA, 2017), which continues to exacerbate and is far stronger in some sectors than others. Staff shortages are becoming more and more serious in healthcare, education and technology, for example, while there is a surplus of young people with economic and agricultural qualifications. So graduates in those two fields, in particular, tend to find work in a whole range of other areas.

**Figure 1.6** Youth unemployment in the Netherlands and other European countries, December 2017.



Source: Eurostat, 2018.

**More flexible and temporary work** • Eighteen months after qualifying or graduating, a substantial proportion of those young people in employment are in either flexible, temporary, agency or casual work, on a training contract or in a subsidized job. Rates of these forms of employment are particular high amongst those with an MBO-BOL qualification or an HBO degree.

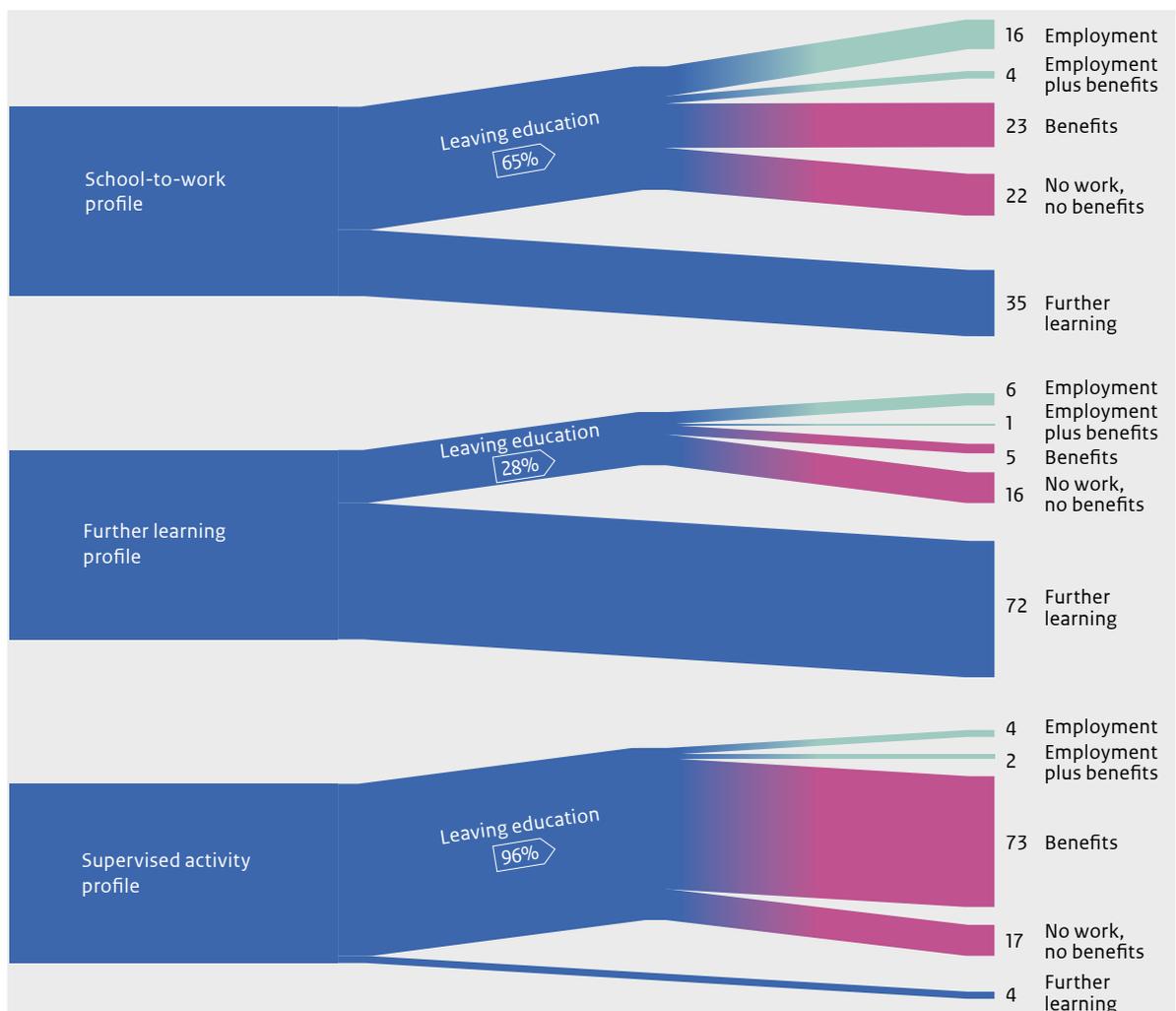
**Less satisfaction with employment match** • The percentage of qualified young people who say they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the start their schooling gave them in the jobs market has fallen. Amongst WO graduates, the figure was 63 per cent in 2009 but only 51 per cent in 2015 (VSNU, 2016). Satisfaction rates were slightly better for holders of an MBO or HBO degree, but even in these groups between a quarter (HBO) and just over a third (MBO-BOL, Level 4) were unhappy to a greater or lesser degree with the

match between their studies and their work (ROA, 2017).

**Poor job prospects after special education** •

Employment opportunities for young people leaving special education (VSO) are limited. Only 19 per cent go straight from school into a workplace, in many cases a social enterprise. It is worrying just how many VSO leavers are unable to find work or further learning opportunities (see figure 1.7). Whichever of the three schooling profiles they have completed (school-to-work, further learning or supervised activity), very few actually progress into the labour market. Even amongst those in the school-to-work profile, only 20 per cent actually find a job. Almost a quarter are on benefits and 22 per cent have neither work nor benefits. Clearly, this group is not benefiting from the buoyant labour market in the same way as those with higher qualifications.

**Figure 1.7** Post-school outcomes of VSO pupils by profile, in per cent.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.



## 2 Opportunities and segregation

**Trends in educational opportunities** • In 2016 we reported increasing inequality in educational opportunities. Pupils with less well-educated parents tend to be recommended for less ambitious forms of secondary education than peers with comparable performance in the classroom but better-educated parents, and those recommendations are less likely to be revised. These pupils then enter secondary education at a lower level and more often transfer to an even lower one. The underlying context does now appear to be improving in favour of more equal opportunities, with more dual recommendations and more pupils advancing within secondary education by combining or “stacking” school qualifications, but inequality persists. Pupils in practical (PRO) and basic vocational (VMBO-B) streams are still more likely to have poorly-educated parents, those in the pre-university VWO well-educated ones. And we see similar disparities in further and higher education.

**Clear segregation in primary education** • In primary education, segregation is relatively clear-cut. Parents tend to choose schools with pupils from the same background as their own. In fact, the degree of segregation in primary schools is higher than in the communities they serve, with its principal yardstick being parental educational background. University-educated parents, in particular, are more likely to send their children to schools already populated by pupils with a similar background. Segregation by parental income is also growing, although ethnic segregation is declining. And the extent of segregation varies widely by district. Schools offering distinctive educational concepts contribute strongly to segregation, because they tend to appeal to well-educated parents, while minority faith schools encourage ethnic segregation as they mainly attract pupils with a migrant background.

**Differences between boys and girls** • There are also considerable differences between boys and girls in terms of educational career. These are particularly obvious in secondary education and beyond. At the secondary level, more boys repeat years and they are more likely to be in less ambitious streams. From the moment they choose an examination profile, boys and girls diverge even more markedly. This gap continues to widen with the choice of an MBO vocational training course or degree study and is eventually reflected in differing prospects for young men and women entering the jobs market.

## 2.1 Inequality of opportunity in school careers

**Inequality** • In the past two years we have shown that inequality of opportunity is increasing in the Dutch education system. Pupils with comparable learning performances at one level are being streamed into different forms of education at the next, and the disparities are growing. Their parents' qualifications largely determine the type of secondary education a pupil receives. Fortunately, we are now observing greater equality of opportunity in some areas, but in others there has been no progress.

### Effects of streaming recommendations

**Comparable performance results in different recommendations** • Pupils with less well-educated parents are more likely to be advised to enter a less ambitious form of secondary education than their compulsory “eleven-plus” Central Final Test (CET, or equivalent) scores in the final year of primary school would indicate. One example illustrates this well: of all the pupils whose test results in 2017 showed that they would be suitable for the VMBO-G/T track, 25 per cent of those with poorly-educated parents were actually recommended to join the less ambitious VMBO-K. For those with well-educated parents, that figure was just 6 per cent. Of all pupils with well-educated parents, 34 per cent received a recommendation to enter one of the more academic secondary streams (HAVO or higher); for those with poorly-educated parents, the proportion was 9 per cent.

**Adjustment barely reduces the disparity** • Figure 2.1 reveals just how closely parental qualifications relate to the phenomena of “overrecommendation” and “underrecommendation”. It shows that pupils with university-educated parents (WO-level) have up to 30 per cent more chance of receiving a “higher” recommendation (that is, for a more ambitious form of schooling) than we should expect based on their CET (or equivalent) scores, and up to 30 per cent less chance of receiving a “lower” recommendation (for a less ambitious stream or track). Adjustment only helps reduce that latter disparity; the chance of “underrecommendation” after adjustment is barely reduced at all.

**Adjustment more common for pupils with a migrant background or with well-educated parents** • As in the previous year, in 2017 one in three pupils qualified for reconsideration of their streaming recommendation because their subsequent CET (or equivalent) scores were higher than expected. In one in three of these cases, the recommendation was actually adjusted to advise a higher form of secondary education. This, too, was the same

proportion as in 2016. Such adjustments are most common in pupils of non-Western migrant origin, and in the case of those without such a background are more likely when they have well-educated parents.

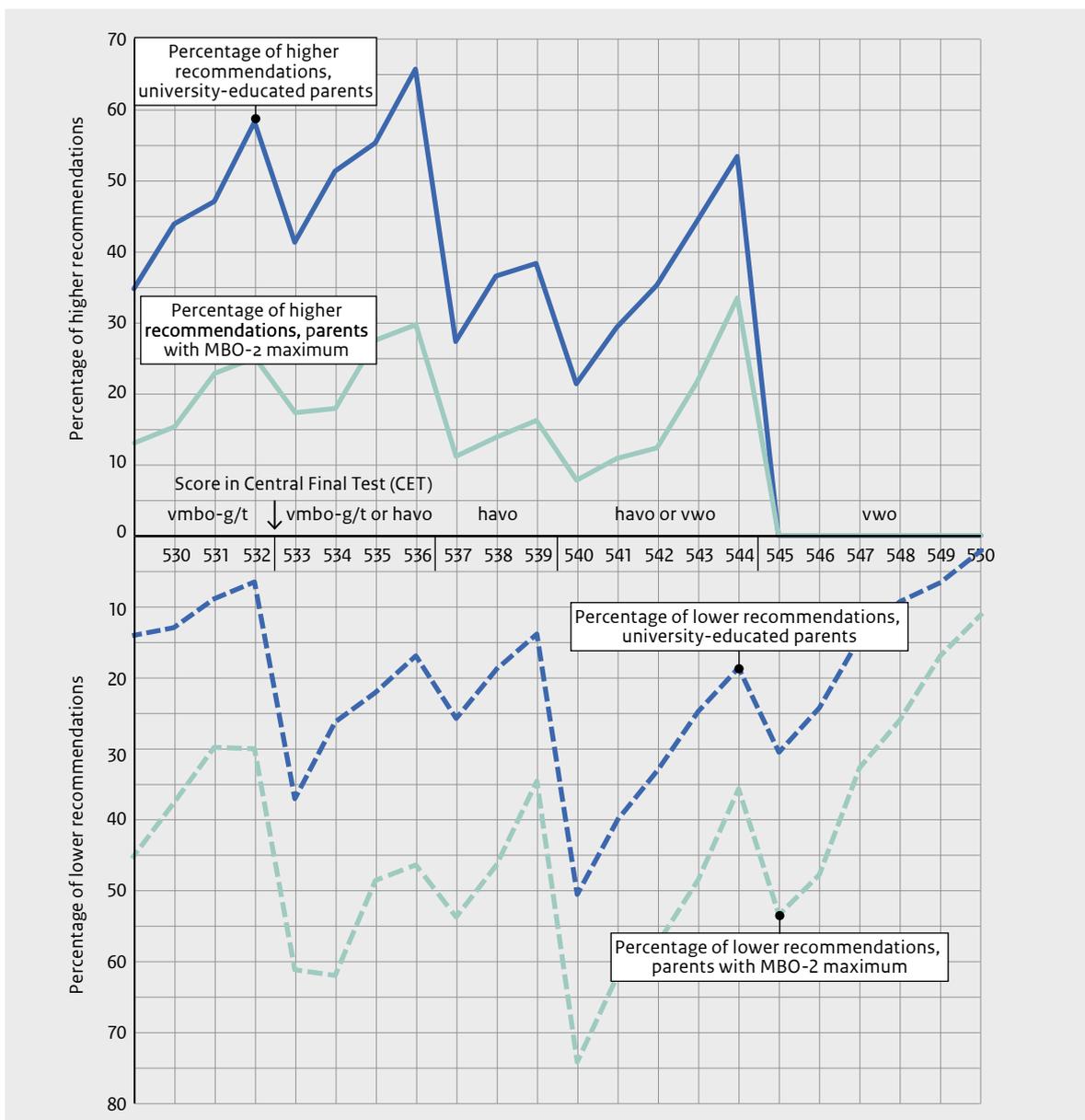
**Differences between cities** • Outside the large cities, pupils more often receive a recommendation lower than their CET (or equivalent) scores would lead us to expect. Higher recommendations are uncommon. This is due in part to the fact that pupils in cities are more likely to have well-educated parents. But there are also substantial differences between cities in terms of discrepancies between recommendations and test scores. Children with a non-Western migrant background have the greatest chance of receiving a higher recommendation in Amsterdam, and the least chance in Utrecht. Pupils in Amsterdam with well-educated parents, too, receive a recommendation at least one whole level higher than indicated by their test scores more often than do their peers in other cities.

**Considerable differences between schools** • Primary schools differ considerably in the extent to which they issue relatively “high” and “low” recommendations. In particular, there are large variations in the percentages of pupils being advised to enter a less ambitious form of secondary education than their CET (or equivalent) scores would indicate. Looking at pupils with a non-Western migrant background in the four largest cities, the proportions with such a relatively low recommendation range by school between 0 and 60 per cent (with one outlier of 80 per cent).

**Behaviour affects recommendations** • Primary schools admit that they do not base their streaming recommendations for secondary education on academic ability and CET (or equivalent) scores alone. Ninety-five per cent also look at behavioural factors and 43 per cent consider their pupils' home situation (Oomens, Scholten and Luyten, 2017). Teachers also state that they find it difficult to make an appropriate recommendation when a pupil's test scores are not straightforward. Both of these factors may explain why children with less well-educated parents are more likely to receive a recommendation lower than we should expect based on their test scores in the final year of primary school.

**Well-educated parents exert pressure for higher recommendations** • About half of primary schools (56 per cent) state that they regularly come under pressure from parents to issue their children with a higher recommendation, and 40 per cent cite this as the principal disruptive factor in the process. Parental interference becomes particularly instrumental in the event that a recommendation is reconsidered; according to schools, pressure from well-educated parents, especially, increases in such cases (Oomens, Scholten and Luyten, 2017).

**Figure 2.1** Percentage of streaming recommendations for secondary education higher (upper diagram) or lower (lower diagram) than indicated by CET scores, by parental education: WO degree level (dark blue curves) and MBO Level 2 vocational diploma or below (light blue curves).



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

## Inequality of educational opportunity in secondary education

### Secondary-education recommendations and “on-time” qualifications

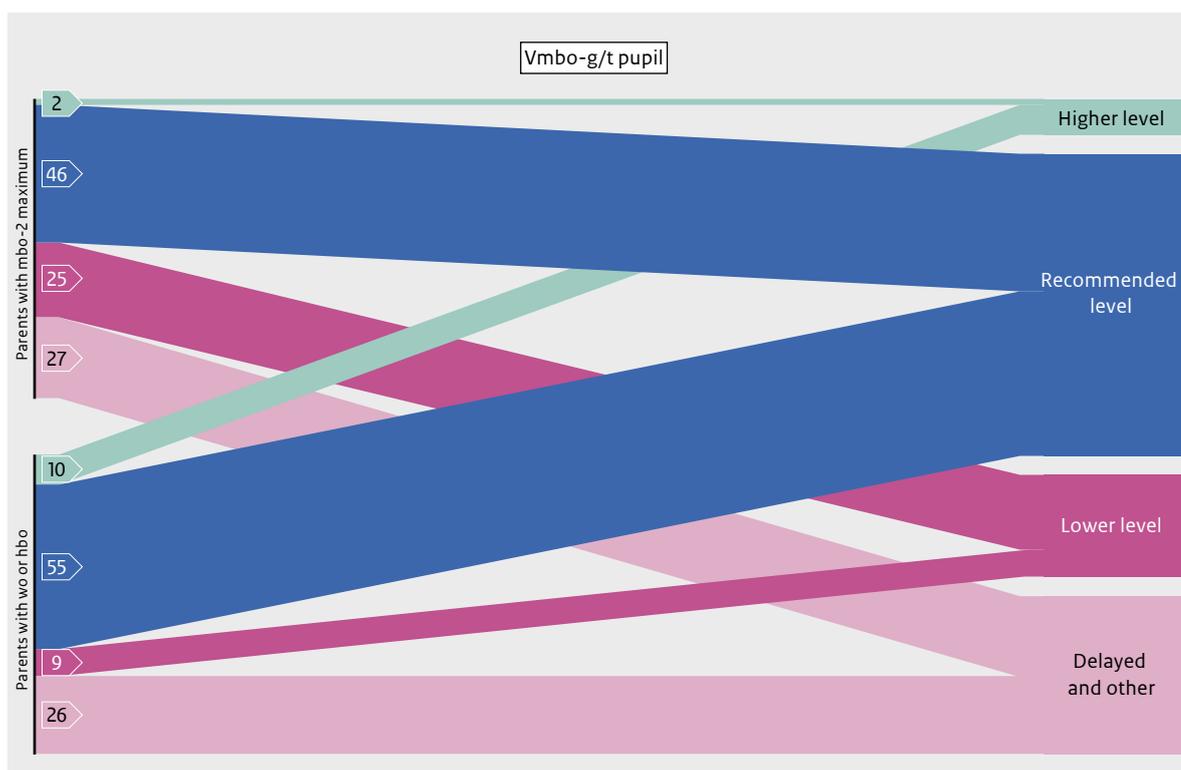
Looking at pupils who entered secondary education in 2011, we find that 52 per cent of those issued with a straightforward (rather than a dual or multiple) streaming recommendation have since obtained a qualification at the recommended level within the nominal time frame for doing so. Another 17 per cent have qualified “on time” at a lower level and 8 per cent at a higher one. Of the 14 per cent who took longer to complete their secondary schooling, 7 per cent qualified at the recommended level, 5 per cent at a lower one and 2 per cent at a higher one. Another 10 per cent are still at secondary school.

**Upgrading and downgrading by pupil group** • The chances of obtaining a secondary-level qualification as recommended vary by pupil background. Those with less well-educated parents are more likely to “downgrade” into a lower form of education, and less likely to “upgrade” into a higher one, than those with better-educated parents. This applies regardless of the recom-

mendation originally received and regardless of whether it was an “overrecommendation”, an “underrecommendation” or one appropriate to their performance and CET (or equivalent) scores. Figure 2.2 shows an example of pupil outcomes six years after entering a particular form of secondary education (in this case the VMBO-G/T track). From this we see that, of pupils indicated by both test scores and school recommendation as best suited for VMBO-G/T, 55 per cent of those with university-educated (WO-level) parents obtain that qualification within the nominal time frame. This compares with 46 per cent of those with parents educated to MBO Level 2 or below. Members of the former group are more likely to end up with a higher qualification than VMBO-G/T, moreover, whereas the latter more frequently “downgrade” or take longer to qualify at VMBO-G/T level. We see similar results in pupils whose test scores and school recommendation guided them into the more academic forms of secondary education (HAVO and VWO).

**Ethnic picture less clear** • We also find differences by ethnic origin, but these are not as straightforward as those described above. In general, though, pupils without a migrant background have a greater chance

**Figure 2.2** Percentage of VMBO G/T pupils qualifying within the nominal time frame at the recommended level and a higher or lower one, by parental education.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

of obtaining a secondary-school qualification at or above the recommended level within the allotted time frame and are less likely to suffer delays in their educational career or remain unqualified after six years.

**Sharp growth in shadow education** • Reasons for the disparities of educational opportunity by background include differences in expectations, quality of education, attitude, motivation and support at home. In the latter respect, it is notable that the market for private supplementary tutoring, homework supervision, educational support and examination coaching has grown rapidly in the past ten years. In that time, both the number of providers of such “shadow” education and the amount spent on it by parents have increased sharply. A recent study reveals that it is mainly well-educated parents who buy additional teaching and support for their children (De Geus and Bisschop, 2018). For those receiving the help, it is doubtless beneficial. The question is: what do we do for pupils not receiving it?

## 2.2 Segregation and choice of schools

**Segregation by choice of school** • Parents and pupils often choose schools attended primarily by children from a similar background. And the same applies to students in their choice of course. The resulting segregation of both schools and courses by population background is higher in the Netherlands than in comparable countries (Ladd, Fiske and Ruijs, 2011; Boterman, 2018).

### Segregation in primary education by choice of school

**Segregation by parental education** • In primary schools, parental education is the predominant segregation factor. Pupils with less well-educated parents attend schools where a relatively high proportion of their classmates also fall into that category. And the same applies to the children of better-educated parents. Segregation by income and ethnic background is not as marked, but still considerable. Figure 2.3 shows the exact extent of segregation by parental education, with the y-axis revealing that the percentage of pupils (in both groups combined) who would have to switch schools in order to achieve equilibrium in this respect ranges between 40 and 65 per cent in most large towns and cities.

The highest proportion of all, indicating the most acute segregation, is in The Hague. Almere and Haarlemmermeer are the least segregated by parental education. In many places this form of segregation is increasing, but in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht it is declining. By contrast, segregation by parental income is increasing almost everywhere. In respect of ethnic segregation, however, the general trend is in the opposite direction. Compared with pupils from a non-migrant background, those of non-Western migrant origin are still more likely to attend a school predominantly populated by others in that same category, but the distinction is fading steadily.

**Considerable differences between cities** • In the Netherlands, the concept of segregation in education is generally associated with the four major cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague). In fact, though, it is often comparable and sometimes even more acute in smaller towns. However, this does not apply to former urban overspill communities like Almere, Zoetermeer and Haarlemmermeer. Moreover, segregation assumes different dimensions in different places. By parental education and income, it is greatest in the major cities. But by ethnicity it is particularly high in relatively small towns such as Ede and Breda.

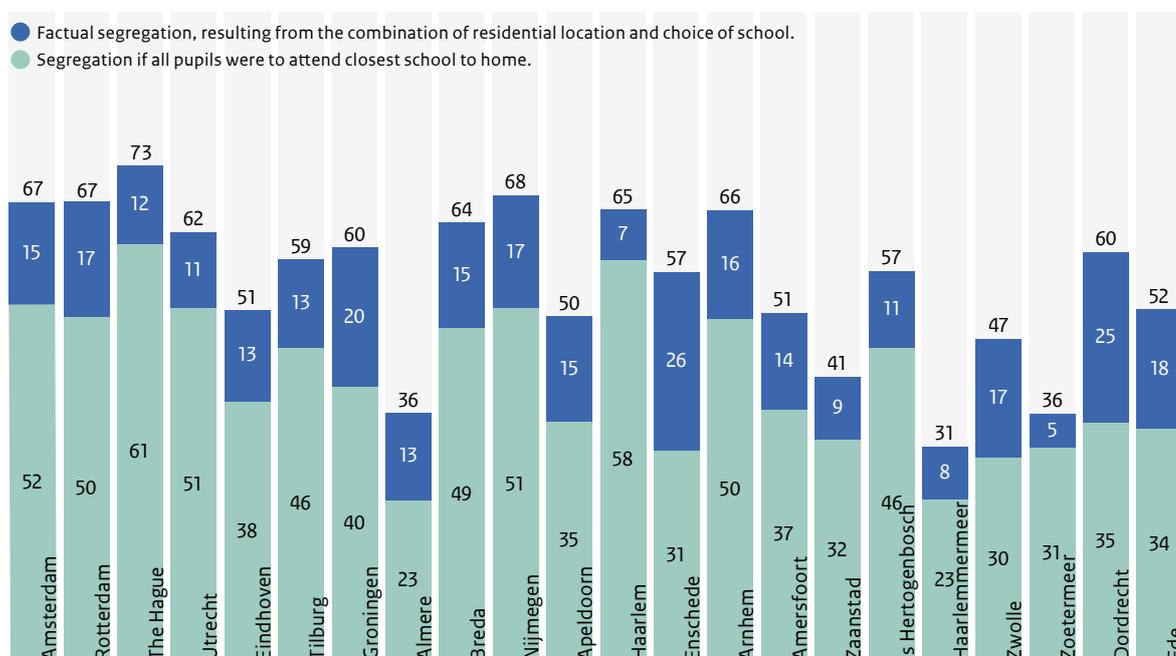
### Schools more homogeneous than communities

The most obvious explanation for segregated schools is segregated living: different kinds of pupil live in different areas. Because of that, segregation would still exist even if they were all to go to the nearest school. But in all Dutch towns and cities it would then be substantially lower than is currently the case. In other words, schools here are much more segregated than the communities they serve (see figure 2.4). This applies everywhere, but the extent of the disparity varies widely from place to place. In towns like Haarlem and Zoetermeer, the degree to which schools are segregated closely parallels the situation in the community. In other words, it is explained almost wholly by segregated living. But in Ede and Dordrecht, for instance, the composition of a school’s neighbourhood has relatively little bearing even though segregated living still represents a substantial proportion of overall segregation. Other research shows that parents do not necessarily select the closest school to home, but take other factors into account. For example, they look at average performance and the socio-economic composition of the pupil population (Borghans, Golsteyn and Zöhlitz, 2015; Koning and Van der Wiel, 2013).

**Figure 2.3** Extent of segregation in primary schools according to parental education, income and migrant background, 2008-2016.

Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

**Figure 2.4** Segregation of primary schools by parental education, 2016, divided by effects of community segregation and choice of school.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

### Segregation in secondary education

**Differences in choice of schools too** • In secondary education, as at the primary level, there are clear differences between schools in the composition of their pupil populations. Pupils without a migrant background and the children of parents with a higher socio-economic status more frequently attend schools with good examination results, where most of the other pupils are like them (and most of the other parents are like theirs). Pupils of Turkish or Moroccan origin often go to schools with a high proportion of pupils from a non-Western migrant background, relatively close to where they live and in many cases with poorer average examination results.

**Less ethnic but more socio-economic segregation** • These differences in choice of school also result in segregation. As in primary education, the predominant factor here is parental education; segregation by parental income and ethnicity plays a minor part in this. Current trends also echo those at the primary level, with ethnic segregation declining but that by socio-economic background increasing.

### Segregation due to variety of provision

**Varied school-driven segregation** • Do some types of school particularly facilitate segregation and others counter it? Our observation is that parents with a strong

religious or ethnic identity tend to choose faith schools reflecting that identity. Primary schools offering distinctive educational concepts are preferred mainly by better-educated parents. In almost all Dutch cities and larger towns, “minority” faith (Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, etc.) schools play a relatively major role in bringing about ethnic segregation, whereas orthodox Protestant ones do not contribute significantly. Meanwhile, non-denominational autonomous schools (often offering distinctive concepts such as Montessori education) are relatively prominent in encouraging socio-economic segregation. On the other hand, denominational (Roman Catholic and Protestant) schools are generally less responsible for that phenomenon. That religious denomination and didactic concept are important to some, but that groups of parents and pupils differ in the significance they attach to them, is also confirmed by other research (Borghans, Golsteyn and Zölitz, 2015; Denessen, Driessen and Slegers, 2005).

**Increasing provision of distinctive concepts** • The number of schools offering a distinctive educational concept is increasing, as is the proportion of pupils attending them. Our inspectors are encountering more and more bilingual schools, “technasiums” (technical grammar schools) and technical academies, “innovation schools” and other unusual profiles. The number of free schools and international schools is also growing rapidly. Pupil numbers at Muslim primary schools are increasing.

And the independent secondary sector is expanding slightly, too.

**New provision increases segregation** • The increase in the number of schools offering distinctive concepts and other non-standard provision is changing the education market. These institutions often appeal to a very specific pupil population and may therefore be one of the causes of greater segregation of primary schooling by parental income and educational background. Minority faith schools, too, attract a particular group and so exacerbate ethnic segregation at the primary level.

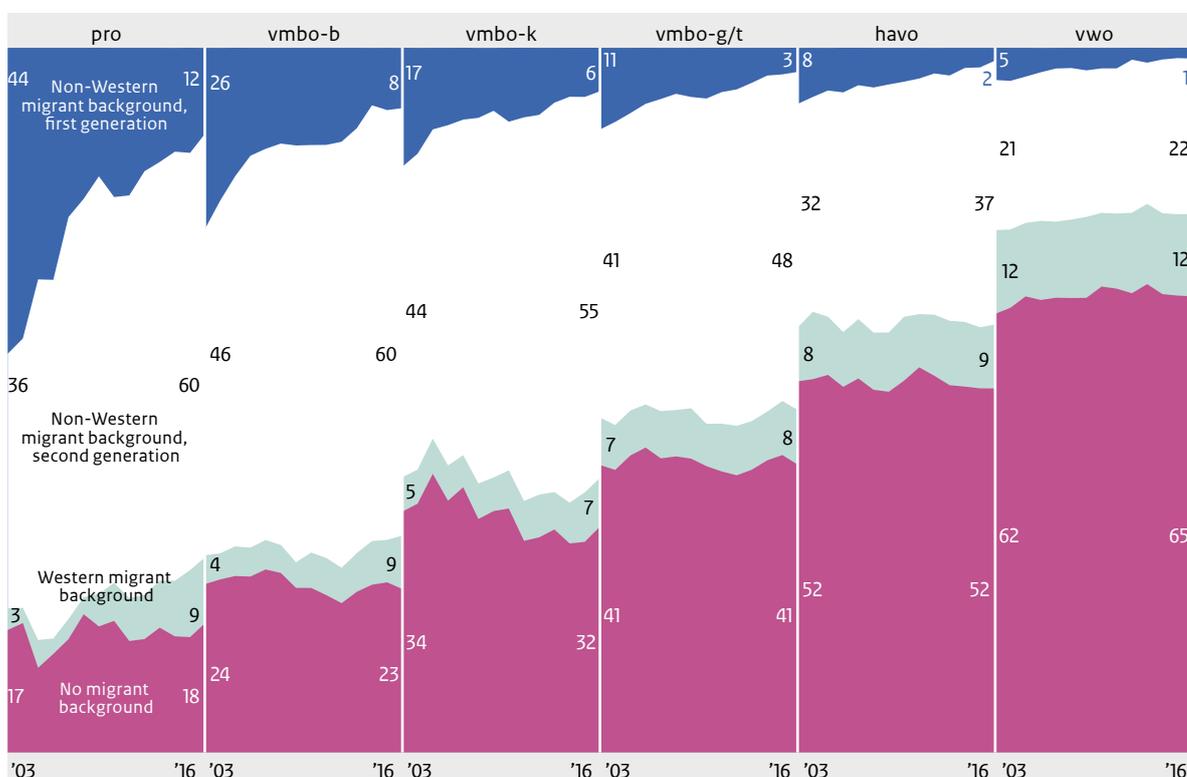
**Segregation undermines social cohesion** • As far as learning outcomes are concerned, segregated education can have both positive and negative effects (Bakker, 2012; Dronkers, 2010; Sykes, 2011; Sykes and Kuyper, 2013; Van Ewijk and Sleegers, 2010). With regard to social cohesion and contact between different groups in society, however, various studies have shown that its impact is quite clearly negative (e.g. Munniksmma et al., 2017).

## 2.3 Pupils by type of secondary, further and higher education

### Segregation by background and type of schooling in secondary education

**Strong segregation by type of schooling** • At the secondary level, the compositions of the pupil population in each type of schooling vary widely. This is most marked in the most urban areas. The majority of pupils on vocational tracks have less well-educated parents and, in the cities in particular, most have a migrant background. The pre-university VWO stream, by contrast, is dominated by pupils with better-educated parents and, in the cities, a non-migrant background. In the four largest cities, the level of segregation in this respect is quite remarkable (see figure 2.5). There, in 2016-17 pupils with a non-Western migrant background made up 68 per cent of the VMBO-B population, 61 per cent in the VMBO-K track, 51 per cent in VMBO-G/T, 39 per cent in HAVO and 23 per cent in VWO. The percent-

Figure 2.5 Types of secondary schooling in the four major cities, 2003-2017, by pupil migration background.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

age of pupils with a migrant background is increasing across the board, but much faster in the VMBO stream than in VWO. One significant cause of the pattern of segregation according to type of schooling is the early selection which typifies the Dutch system: pupils are streamed by ability at a young age. As a result, reports the OECD (2012, 2016), low expectations and loss of motivation can severely undermine the school performance of pupils from deprived backgrounds. Because these are youngsters who need time to develop, early selection means that they are often streamed into a form of education beneath their true abilities.

### Segregation by background and type of schooling in further and higher education

**Composition of student population distorted** • In vocational training (MBO) and higher education, as in previous phases, students are evenly distributed across the various forms in terms of their parental education and migrant background (or lack of it). The highest concentrations of those with poorly-educated parents or a non-Western migrant background are found in MBO levels 1 and 2, the lowest on vocational (HBO) and academic (WO) degree courses. In particular, the percentages from non-Western migrant backgrounds are relatively small at HBO (17 per cent) and WO (14 per cent) level. These rates do increase slightly each year, but only by a quarter of a percentage point for WO and a third of one for HBO. WO courses have been attracting more students with a Western migrant background in recent years, increasing their proportion by 2 percentage points annually, but the majority of them are overseas students coming to the Netherlands purely to take their degree.

**Segregation at university level** • Almost half of those who pass their VWO at school and go on to enrol on an academic degree (WO) course have parents in the highest income category. But the proportion varies widely according to course profile. It is lowest, less than 43 per cent in 2016, in the profile groups “Behaviour and Society” and “Language and Culture”, whereas it is highest in “Economics” (52 per cent) and in programmes cutting across profile boundaries, which are offered mainly by university colleges (55 per cent). Of students who pass their HAVO at school and go on to enrol on a vocational degree (HBO) course, between 29 and 35 per cent have parents in the highest income category. Here, though, there seem to be relatively few differences in course profile. The only one to stand out is “Education”, which clearly has the lowest proportion of students in the highest parental income category, 26 per cent.

## 2.4 Gender segregation

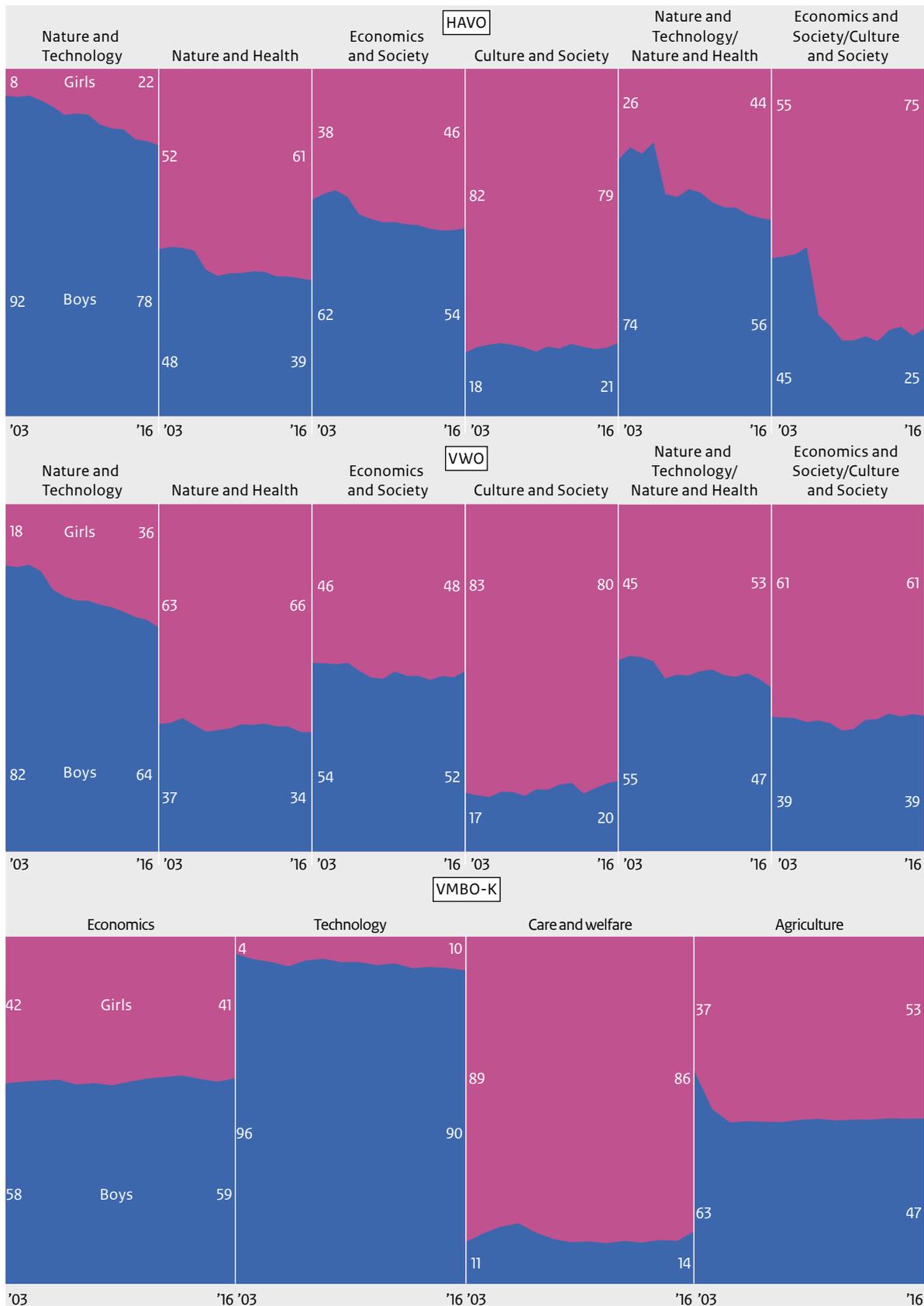
**Girls graduate faster** • Educational differences between boys and girls emerge mainly at secondary school. At this stage, boys are more likely to be held back a year than girls. They also “downgrade” to a less ambitious form of education more often, and “upgrade” less frequently. Young women are more successful in further and higher education, too, on average qualifying or graduating faster than their male peers. At the bottom end of the educational ladder, moreover, more boys are in practical education (PRO), special secondary education (VSO) and MBO admission diploma courses.

### Choice of profile in secondary education

**Choices depending on gender** • The differences between boys and girls in the examination profiles they choose at secondary school are sometimes striking. In VMBO, for example, the “Technology” option is almost exclusively a male preserve and “Care and Welfare” almost exclusively female (see figure 2.6). At HAVO and VWO levels, too, “Nature and Technology” (N&T) is selected predominantly by boys: 78 and 64 per cent, respectively. Conversely, 79 per cent (HAVO) and 80 per cent (VWO) of those opting for “Culture and Society” (C&M) are girls.

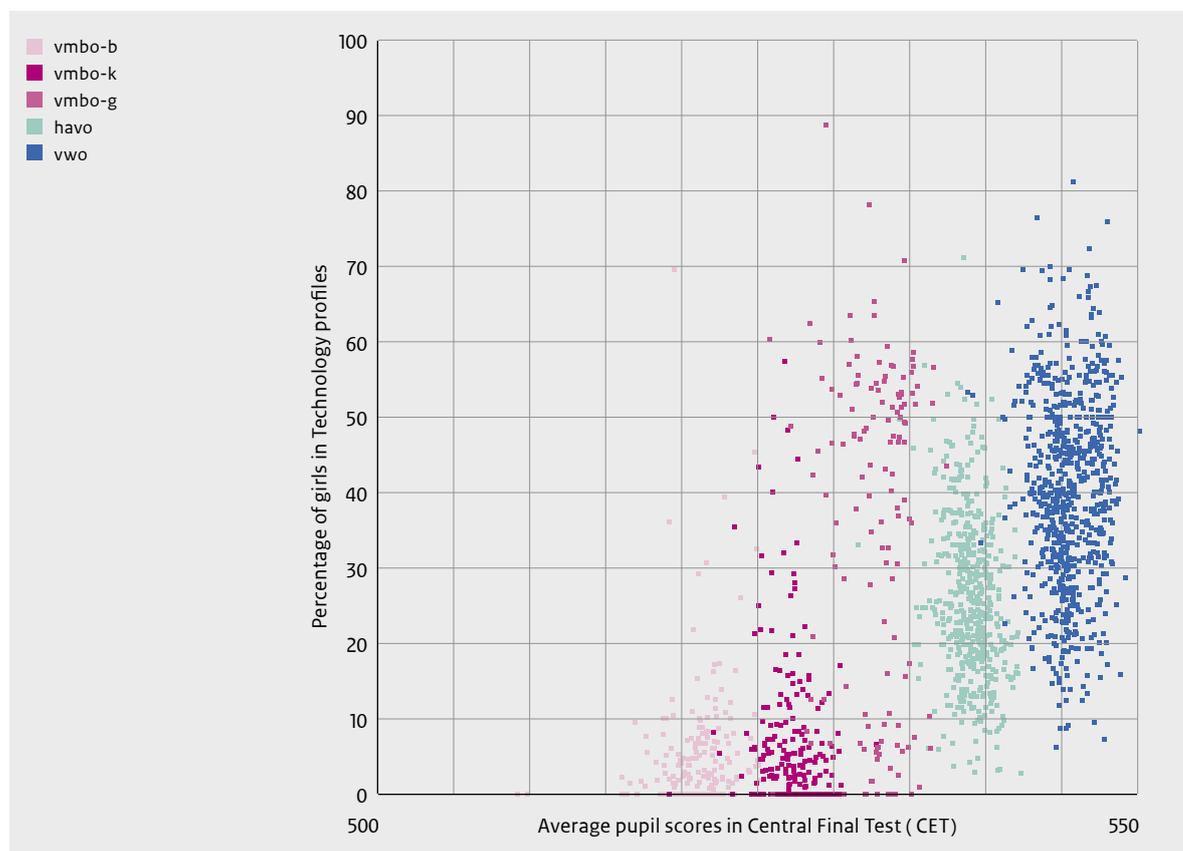
**More girls are choosing science profiles** • In HAVO and VWO, we do see an increase in the proportion of girls choosing the profiles “Nature and Health” (N&G) as well as N&T (see figure 2.6). Not that fewer boys are selecting this option, though; in fact, its overall population has grown enormously: the number of female VWO pupils taking it has quadrupled since the 2003-2004 school year, and the number of males doubled. There has been comparable, if not quite as spectacular, growth in the number of both boys and girls choosing N&T or N&G as their HAVO examination profile. The Technology option in VMBO-B/K has seen an significant increase in female pupils since 2003/2004, too, although they still account for less than 10 per cent of the total. In VMBO-G Technology, by contrast, their number rose substantially from 17 per cent in 2003-2004 to 30 per cent in 2014-2015, although it then dropped back to 22 per cent in 2016-2017. However, there were no such changes in the number of boys opting for Care and Welfare in the same period.

**Figure 2.6** Proportions of boys and girls in each examination profile in selected levels of secondary education, 2003-2016.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

**Figure 2.7** Percentages of girls in Nature and Technology and combined Nature and Technology/Nature and Health profiles by secondary school, compared with average pupil Central Final Test scores.



Source: Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

#### Differences between schools in choice of profile by gender

• The extent to which girls and boys differ in their choice of examination profile varies considerably from school to school. This is apparent from figure 2.7, which plots all Dutch secondary schools by the percentage of girls taking the N&T or combined N&T/N&G profiles. At some schools girls are actually in the majority, but at others they make up only a fifth of the “Technology” population. Belfi, Levels and Van der Velden (2015) show that institutions are often very well aware that differences exist between the choices made by girls and boys and their examination success rates, but they do not easily recognize the causes and rarely pursue a deliberate policy designed to eliminate the discrepancies.

• **Chosen profile limits choice of degree** • Choosing certain examination profiles at secondary level narrows a pupil’s subsequent choice of degree courses. Technical disciplines and medicine, in particular, tend to demand that new entrants have taken a particular profile or set of subjects. Some profiles, such as N&T,

thus leave all options open, while others – Culture and Society (C&M), for example – restrict freedom of choice in subsequent studies. The profile a pupil selects at this stage in their school career can therefore partially determine their later educational options and hence ultimately their career prospects.

#### Choice of studies in further and higher education

##### Substantial gender differences by domain in MBO training choices

• As in previous years, we must again conclude that men and women have very different preferences when it comes to vocational training. At all MBO levels, the male-female ratio varies widely by domain. At levels 2 and 3, for example, more than 90 per cent of students in the Technology domain are men and over 80 per cent in Care and Welfare are women. At Level 4 those figures are 63 per cent and just over 80 per cent, respectively. At the other levels, men represent between about 55 and 65 per cent of students in both the Environment and the Economics domains.

**Gender differences per domain in vocational higher education** • The picture in vocational higher education (HBO degree courses at universities of applied science) is much the same as in MBO training, although gender segregation is not quite as marked. Nevertheless, men still tend to opt for technical courses (75 per cent male) and women for social and behavioural studies (77 per cent female), healthcare (81 per cent) and education (65 per cent).

**Gender ratios in choice of academic study** • In academic higher education (WO degree courses at research universities), men are overrepresented in economic and technical studies (68 and 74 per cent, respectively). However, the number of women in these domains has been rising since 2006. Over the past ten years, the percentage of women studying for a technical degree has increased from 15 to 26 per cent. This is still a low proportion compared with other countries, though, and well below the EU average. Of the countries surveyed by the OECD (2017b), only Turkey had fewer female technical students. By contrast, the proportion of women reading subjects categorized as social and behavioural studies (72 per cent female), healthcare (72 per cent) or languages and culture (67 per cent) is relatively high.

## Career prospects

**More women on courses with good employment opportunities** • Women are more likely to choose the courses offering the best chance of finding a job immediately after graduation. This, we observe, applies across the spectrum from MBO levels 3 and 4 to HBO and WO degrees: in all of these, the courses from which the most graduates go straight into work have a high proportion of female students. This advantage does not extend to MBO Level 2, however. Moreover, men tend to embark on careers resulting in higher hourly pay rates five years after graduation or qualification, while women opt for courses leading to jobs with the lowest hourly rates five years later. These findings echo the results of other research, which further reveals that many women take up careers in sectors – typified by healthcare and education – with relatively low unemployment but also lower average salaries, fewer pay increases and a lot of part-time working (Merens and Bucx, 2018).





## 3 Quality, autonomy and governance

**No sustained quality improvement** • That performances in school education are under pressure is not a positive development. The increased educational inequality and segregation in this sector impede fulfilment of its social mission. Despite the large number of good schools and courses in the Netherlands, it is proving impossible to improve the quality of education for all pupils and students in a sustained manner. The current balance between local autonomy and central control fails to guarantee that. In some respects, moreover, the equilibrium is precarious because the autonomy available to schools is not always appreciated and utilized to the full due to excessive workloads, inadequate accountability and increased polarization.

**Ambitions and integrated management cannot be taken for granted** • The vast majority of teachers, school leaders and governors do their best to deliver high-quality education. Strikingly, though, most are satisfied with compliance with the minimum quality standards. A far smaller proportion are committed to ongoing personal development and to active quality management by attaching staffing and financial consequences to improvement. When this is done, our inspectors encounter outstanding education, strong teaching and support teams, good school leaders and governors and a strong quality culture. On the other hand, various factors can hinder improvement – for example, a lack of insight into what works and insufficient learning from peers. The wide variety of opinions about what actually constitutes good quality also regularly stands in the way, as does a lack of policy frameworks and support at some schools. Then there are the pressure of work experienced by some teachers and school leaders and the shortages of qualified personnel at certain schools.

**Open and soft control achieves limited results** • More and more local, regional and national alliances and networks are being formed in and around education. In many cases these focus on wider issues, such as equal opportunities, appropriate education for children with special needs, shrinking communities and tailoring education to the labour market. Their aims and methods vary widely, even when they are superficially similar. Many are based on voluntary cooperation, with arrangements to ensure their resilience and tenacity more often than not lacking. And they are more likely to be rendered accountable for their input than their output.

### 3.1 Balancing local autonomy with central control

#### **Autonomous professionals and limited central control**

• The balance between central control and the autonomy afforded the professionals on the ground is unique to the Dutch education system (Onderwijsraad, 2014; 2017a; Hooge, 2017). Compared with other countries, teachers and school leaders here are allowed substantial scope to organize the education they provide as they see fit. Learning outcomes and final examination syllabi set by central government provide a framework and guarantee minimum quality standards. Governors are responsible for ensuring that their schools and courses comply with these standards, and the Inspectorate of Education monitors them in that. A system providing such a high degree of autonomy certainly has its advantages: it is based on trust, it imbues the professional with substantial responsibility and it rewards customization and variation (OECD, 2017).

#### **Unsteady balance is not achieving desired results**

• As we note elsewhere in this report, Dutch schoolchildren are not performing as well as they used to, not all are achieving the minimum attainment targets and they are behind their peers in other countries in terms of their civic knowledge and disposition. They also face increasing inequality of opportunity, with substantial differences between schools and growing segregation by parental income and education. Some schools are achieving successes with their pupils and making a positive contribution in fulfilling their social mission, but others are not. Evidently, our model of local autonomy with limited central control is no guarantee of steadily improving education. In fact, as our inspectors observe at schools and in governing bodies, regional initiatives and central management, the model is losing its equilibrium.

### 3.2 Quality assurance in education

#### **Improvement by schools and governing bodies**

• **Schools and courses feel centrally controlled** • In the Netherlands, schools are free to decide how much time they devote to certain subjects. And teachers can choose or develop their own classroom methods. Schools also adopt their own profiles, as a result of which there is a varied range of educational provision and pupils and students are given considerable freedom of choice. What are determined centrally are the standard learning outcomes for compulsory education, the requirement that primary schools test

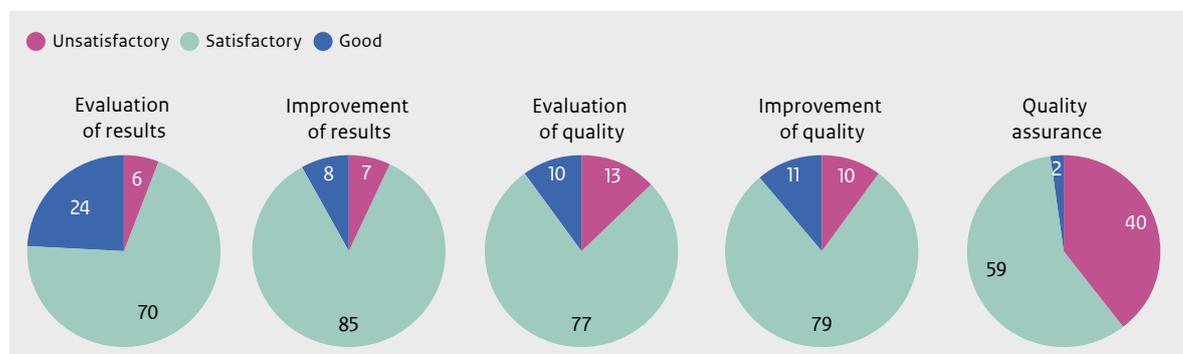
pupils in their final year, the national final examinations in secondary education and the requirement that students in further and higher education also sit examinations. The law also lays down criteria for teachers' qualifications and for contact hours. Quality standards in higher education are upheld through an accreditation system, while in the other sectors there is an inspection regime. In practice, we observe that the desired balance between central control and local autonomy is not as steady as it should be: many teachers and school leaders feel that they are expected to do too much in a limited time, are restricted in their freedom to make choices and are bound by too many rules. They sometimes lack support, too – in the form of guidance or frameworks, for example, or in practical ideas to make improvements.

#### **Good quality assurance and structural improvement**

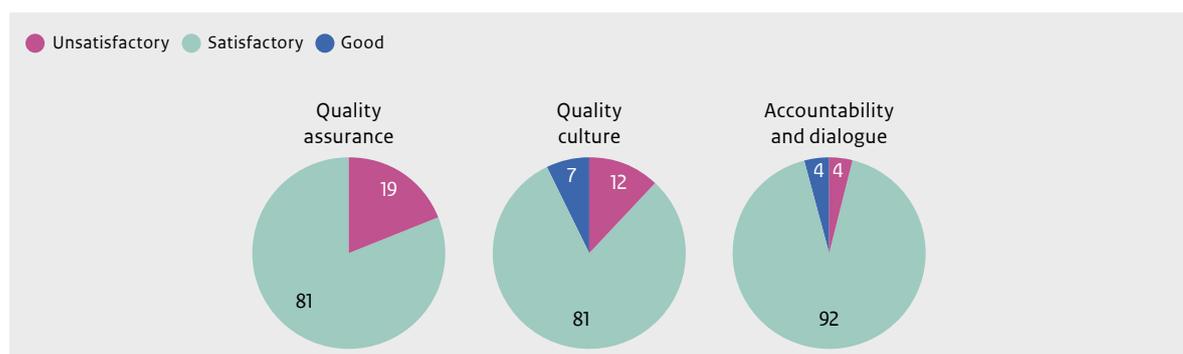
• Almost every school and course monitors the quality of the education it provides. In this respect, there has been great improvement in recent years. A clear majority of school leaders and course directors now possess a good insight into the strengths of their provision and where it could be better, and use this knowledge to make improvements as needed. As such, quality assurance within the Dutch education system is generally adequate (see also figures 3.1a and 3.1b). But a minority of schools and courses go much further: they utilize the monitoring information to promote quality in an active, comprehensive and effective manner. Encouraged by a good leader or director, teachers often enjoy working in professional teams dedicated to enhancing quality. At these schools or on these courses, some classified as “excellent” by the Inspectorate, pupils and students benefit from good and constantly improving educational standards. The schools and courses in question are found across a wide range of denominations and didactic concepts, with all kinds of pupil and student populations.

#### **Analysis-based improvement remains challenging**

• At the other end of the spectrum, there is a minority of schools and courses where quality assurance is insufficient and improvement is not approached in a systematic manner. Even these schools and courses are usually in a position to analyse their progress or lack of it – it is just that they do not act on the findings. Our inspectors observe teachers and schools learning little from each other, and in many cases inadequate team working. Staff professionalization activities are often uncoordinated and the school leader lacks pedagogical management ability. Moreover, what constitutes quality may not be clearly defined and there is frequently an absence of collective ambition. Needless to say, these schools and courses are classified as “unsatisfactory” in respect of quality assurance (see figures 3.1a and 3.1b).

**Figure 3.1a** Quality classifications, secondary schools.

Source: inspectors' reports, Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

**Figure 3.1b** Quality classifications, MBO courses

Source: inspectors' reports, Netherlands Inspectorate of Education, 2018.

### Positive experiences with team-based professionalization

Increasing numbers of teachers and school leaders are introducing programmes to stimulate team-based professionalization. These enhance the quality of a school's educational provision by encouraging teaching staff to work together and share know-how. In general, moreover, they seem to enhance teachers' enjoyment of their work. In recent years, it is mainly in the secondary sector that such programmes have been implemented. Schools have also been experimenting with various types of knowledge-based networking, such as "academic workplaces", "learning circles" and teacher research teams. Some 500 schools now take part in the "LeerKRACHT" programme, in which teachers observe each others' lessons, prepare classes together and share experiences. Participants are very positive about this form of networking (Boogaard, Schenke, Van Schaik and Felix, 2017). With any such scheme, though, it is important that the objective be absolutely clear and that those taking part acquire know-how they are actually able to put into practice in their own work. In addition, collaborative and collective-learning teams need to feel that they have the full backing of the school

leadership, which is after all responsible for facilitating, embedding, guiding and building support for their activities (Boogaard et al., 2017).

### HRM policy sometimes too limited

Alongside the positive examples of successful team-based professionalization, there are also some schools and courses which still have a lot to achieve when it comes to developing and applying an effective HRM policy. These often lack focused teacher professionalization activities coupled with efforts to improve the team and organization. In many cases, staff appraisal and development interviews are rare or non-existent and poorly performing teachers are effectively abandoned to their fate. While most of the school leaders and course directors involved are aware of differences between their teachers in terms of the quality of the education they are delivering, they do little or sometimes nothing with that knowledge. Moreover, our inspectors still encounter schools and courses where staff autonomy is cited as a justification for extensive or even excessive non-intervention. Very occasionally that works, but in most cases pupils and students do not benefit from such an approach.

**Effective educational innovation requires more knowledge, expertise and time** • Teachers are often highly motivated to apply effective educational methods. But our inspectors also see school leaders and course directors who experiment extensively with new methods, approaches and ways of organizing their provision. Innovation is good, but only when based on a strategy known to be effective or one which can reasonably be expected to have a positive effect. Not all schools and courses possess the time, knowledge and expertise needed to properly fulfil the highly responsible task of implementing educational innovation (see also Onderwijsraad, 2014). Consequently, some make choices that seem without foundation. Or they have difficulty separating fact from fiction as to what actually works. The resulting well-intentioned improvement efforts sometimes have positive effects for pupils and students, but sometimes negative ones. Rather than customized solutions and professionals enjoying their work, our inspectors then see professional reticence, rapid “churn” in terms of teaching methods and classroom practices, greater pressure of work and the feeling that the teacher can never do things right. Such effects have been observed as a result of implementing new methods to, for example, tackle bullying, promote citizenship, introduce excellence programmes, make more use of IT and support “problem” pupils. Schools and courses also regularly fall short when it comes to withdrawing methods which have proven ineffective.

**Staff shortages and absenteeism hinder quality improvement** • Pressure of work, high rates of sick leave (Hooftman et al., 2017) and unfilled teaching vacancies make it hard for some schools to focus on improving the quality of their educational provision. Primary schools in the Randstad conurbation, in particular, have difficulty finding enough qualified personnel. And in secondary education there are teacher shortages in various subjects, most notably German, physics, mathematics and chemistry (Vloet, Den Uijl and Fontein, 2017). If a school has an unfilled teaching post or loses teachers for any reason, their colleagues have to drop other tasks to prevent lessons being cancelled and school leaders are inclined to fill the gaps as quickly as they can rather than with good candidates. At schools struggling with structural staff shortages, our inspectors regularly encounter high or excessive workloads. In such circumstances, teachers enjoy their job less. And with the team concentrating on simply keeping the school or course running, there is barely time to even think about quality improvement. In this context it is particularly problematic that the staff shortages tend to be concentrated at those schools where pupils have the fewest opportunities in life.

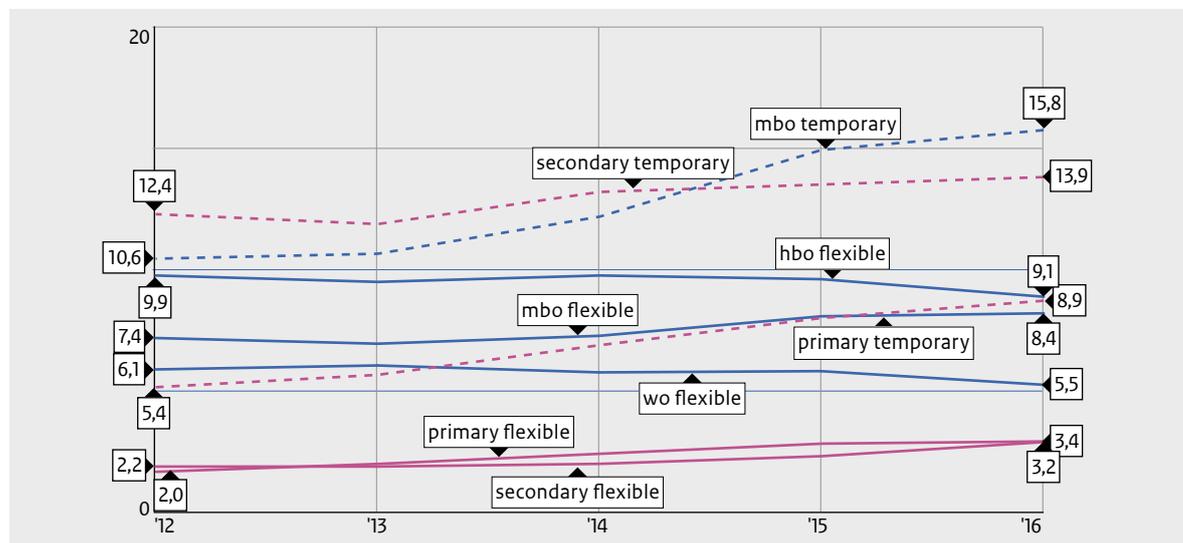
## Quality improvement by governing bodies

**Balancing autonomy and control** • Like teaching staff, school governing bodies in the Netherlands enjoy a high degree of autonomy and can choose their own institutional profile. Because they receive public funding in the form of a block grant, once they have paid their staffing costs they can decide what aspects to prioritize in their remaining spending. However, the government does impose a number of compulsory criteria to ensure sound governance:

- separation of governance and internal monitoring positions;
- control of governance quality;
- financial management by the governing body based on block-grant funding;
- employee representation; and,
- external accountability, including rules for the annual report and its publication.

**Most governing bodies uphold educational quality** • Most governing bodies are aware of their duty to uphold the quality of education and the criteria that imposes on staff and quality-assurance systems. To a greater extent than a few years ago, they also know where the strengths and weaknesses in their courses and provision lie. However, our impression from 285 conversations between inspectors and governing bodies in every sector other than higher education is that they are generally concerned primarily with ensuring compliance with the minimum statutory quality requirements. And quality assurance is inadequate in about one in six cases, with governors either largely unaware of standards at their schools or on their courses or not sufficiently committed to upholding even the minimum requirements.

**Efforts often stop at minimum requirements** • The vast majority of governing bodies have the basic quality of their schools or courses in order, and provide adequate quality assurance. But most are satisfied with compliance with the minimum statutory requirements and take further action only if that is not or is no longer the case. As long it has no officially “unsatisfactory” schools or courses under its auspices, the governing body is generally happy to delegate responsibility for educational quality to school leaders or course directors. It continues to facilitate them in that, but exerts only “soft” control and takes a hands-off approach as far as “learning from each other” is concerned. Only about one governing body in six takes an active approach to further quality improvement even once the basics are in order. These are classified by our inspectors as “good” in quality assurance.

**Figure 3.2** Percentages of temporary and flexible teaching staff by sector, 2012–2016.

Source: Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017a.

#### **Educational policy not closely linked to finances**

Governors are paying increasing attention to educational quality alongside their traditional concern with finances, personnel and premises. Only some, however, seem to connect these various aspects. This is typically evident from the “Continuity” section of the annual report. While these texts are generally improving by the year, they still tend to concentrate very much on financial considerations plus current and expected trends in pupil or student and personnel numbers. Only very occasionally do we see a link being made with educational policy, even in areas where that might seem obvious. In our conversations with governing bodies, we observe that those connections are not always actually recognized. However, there are some interesting examples, especially in further and higher education, which do indicate that a more integrated approach in this respect can bear fruit.

**More flexible and temporary staffing** • In all sectors except higher education, governing bodies have been employing more teaching staff on a flexible or temporary basis in recent years (see also figure 3.2). The main reason for this is to maintain control over the growth of the workforce. Quality of educational provision is not usually cited as a motivating factor, and in fact these forms of employment rarely improve it. At schools with large numbers of temporary and flexible staff, quality is no better than at the rest. In fact, the opposite may be true since a high proportion of such personnel both increases the pressure of work on the permanent staff and limits the remaining financial resources available to the governing body.

#### **Social mission not self-evident for governing bodies**

• From our conversations with governing bodies, it is apparent that many do not associate their outlook with specific improvements to educational provision or with the underlying conditions required for them. In a lot of cases, there is no link with social objectives either. Many governors are keen to fulfil a social mission, such as providing equal opportunities in education, but at the same time they face conflicting interests. And if they do opt to prioritize that mission, they still link it no more than tentatively with quality improvement, limit managerial action in its pursuit and omit to take financial, staffing or premises-related measures which would help reach it. In addition, internal monitors do not always engage in a critical dialogue with the governors on this point.

**Increasing interest in professionalization** • The professionalization of governors and internal monitors is attracting more and more interest. The sectoral councils, for instance, have introduced a variety of programmes to help professionalize governors and governance inspections. And the Association of Institutional Monitors in Education (VTOI) has established its own “academy” offering an extensive range of courses in all aspects of professional internal monitoring. Numerous conferences and gatherings are organized, too, and these are well-attended.

## 3.2 Regional and central control

### Local authority initiatives and regional collaborations

**More and broader regional cooperation** • Recent years have seen an increase in cooperation between school governing bodies at the local and regional levels. Many now work closely together, often as part of a structure in which local and provincial governments, employers and sometimes even healthcare institutions also participate. There are various forms of regional collaboration, including partnerships focusing on education-healthcare relations, appropriate education for children with special needs, equal opportunities, education for the labour market and shrinking communities.

**Local-authority initiatives to promote equality of opportunity** • Local authorities are active partners in a large number of collaborative arrangements. Their initiatives usually focus on a social mission, with promoting equality of educational opportunity within their communities considered by far the most important. To this end they allocate financial resources, reach policy agreements with school governing bodies, monitor developments in the quality of educational provision and demand accountability. Both the scope of such initiatives and their approach vary widely from place to place, as do success rates. For many authorities, cooperating with school governing bodies is not a straightforward task (see Onderwijsraad, 2017a). Sometimes the partnership works well, but in a lot of cases the authority is reliant on the governing body's willingness to engage with it. As an inspectorate, we are regularly asked to assist when such collaborations run into difficulties.

**Partnerships for appropriate education are improving** • Partnerships for appropriate education are a good example of institutionalized regional cooperation. Within them, school governing bodies within a particular region work together to introduce appropriate provision for children with special needs in a coherent manner. Cooperation in most regions has improved markedly since these partnerships were first established, in 2014. At the same time, the regions vary considerably in their approaches, in their organization of the partnership and in how they distribute resources. This variety is certainly not always the product of a deliberate regional choice, but in many cases results from differences of opinion about what the partnership should entail and what its task involves. Moreover, participating governing bodies regularly put their own interests before the social mission – although that is less of an issue when the partnership has properly

organized its own internal monitoring arrangements. Others, however, still lack any form of independent internal control.

**Increasing number of networks and support centres** • We are also observing a sharp increase in the number of informal networks, support centres and associations active within the educational sector. These are typically mixed groups encompassing members of the teaching profession, sectoral councils and other representative bodies, trade unions and government. Many have been established to strengthen a particular aspect of education or to promote some facet of its social mission. Individually, such networks and support centres often do good work. But their growing number, and in some cases their expanding scope, are also leading to fragmentation accompanied by a proliferation of guidelines, rules and lines of accountability (Hooge, 2017). There is already a multitude of policy and guidance initiatives, with more appearing all the time, and sometimes the measures they pursue directly contradict one another. Collectively, moreover, they restrict the professional freedom of teachers and school leaders while at the same time adding to their administrative burden.

### Control from central government

**Lack of consensus about objectives** • Within the Dutch system, there exists a wide range of opinions about what constitutes good education. This spectrum of ideas is reflected in the different educational profiles schools choose to adopt, which in turn results in huge variety and freedom of choice. At same time, however, it also precludes consensus about what education is aiming to achieve. And that is cause for concern. Without broad agreement concerning objectives and minimum quality standards, there can be no common framework and direction. As things currently stand, some schools and courses feel tightly controlled while others perceive almost no control whatsoever. Moreover, not all subscribe even to the minimum prescribed outcome goals and quality requirements. Or they put their own before those laid down nationally. Such lack of consensus and clarity with regard to performance expectations and minimum standards does nothing to help achieve them. Where there is consensus, though, as over the need to counter early school-leaving, there is greater cooperation and so policy and monitoring efforts appear to be more effective.

**Control is “soft” and open** • The Dutch education system features a plethora of networks and ad-hoc arrangements, set up to establish frames of reference

and to further policy initiatives. These loose structures allow considerable freedom of choice in terms of organization, goals and approach. How policy is actually implemented is largely left up to the professionals working in the education sector. To ensure that all pupils leave primary school with at least a set minimum level of literacy and numeracy, for example, benchmarks for these skills have been established. Schools are issued with teaching guides and all kinds of remedial programmes are available for those which need them. There are also various networks, working groups and other ad-hoc arrangements designed to stimulate the effective teaching of literacy and numeracy at primary schools. Monitoring is often “light-touch”, and accountability for outcomes is not always required. In addition, there is frequently no common picture of the desired results. In fact, by no means all schools and governing bodies even know what their own results are. And there are some primary schools which state that they have other priorities than teaching literacy and numeracy. It is hardly surprising, then, that a fairly substantial proportion of pupils fail to achieve even the minimum benchmark standards and a large group falls short of the general attainment targets. Which then begs the question of what has happened to all the resources ploughed into improving performance in these areas. Thus is disappointment guaranteed.

**Social mission not always easy to uphold** • In the Dutch system, it is far from self-evident that education will succeed in its social mission (Onderwijsraad, 2017b). That it is indeed failing to do so is evident from the growing inequality of opportunity (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2016b; 2017d), the huge differences between schools (CPB, 2017; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2017d; Gubbels, Netten and Verhoeven, 2017) and the high degree of segregation we have described elsewhere in this report (see chapter 2). These examples reveal clearly that, in some areas at least, the collective interest is being subordinated to the interests of governing bodies, school leaders, teachers and individual parents. It is not always apparent who is responsible for upholding the public interest and who needs to do what to reverse unwanted trends. And it is questionable whether sufficient effort is being organized to safeguard that interest in the face of pressure from the individual interests of pupils and students, teachers and governors (Onderwijsraad, 2014, 2017b; Waslander, 2016).

# Abbreviations

C&M	Culture and Society
CBS	Statistics Netherlands
CET	Central Final Test
DUO	The Dutch government's Executive Agency for Education. DUO finances and informs pupils and students as well as schools, and facilitates exams
E&M	Economics and Society
HAVO	Senior general secondary education
HBO	Higher professional education (university of applied sciences)
HO	Higher education
IvhO	Inspectorate of Education
JOB	Student union for all Dutch students in vocational education and training
MBO	Senior secondary vocational education
MBO-bol	MBO training track
N&G	Nature and Health
N&T	Nature and Technology
OCW	The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PO	Primary education
PRO	Practical Education
ROA	The Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market
SO	Special education
VMBO	Preparatory secondary vocational education
VMBO-B	Basic vocational track of VMBO
VMBO-K	Advanced vocational track of VMBO
VMBO-G/T	Combined/theoretical track of VMBO
VO	Secondary education
VSO	Special secondary education
VTOI	Association of Institutional Monitors in Education
VWO	Pre-university education
WO	Research-oriented education (research university)

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