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Generating knowledge,
sharing knowledge

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abstract

Generating knowledge, sharing knowledge

English summary of the advisory report *Kennis maken, kennis delen:
naar een innovatiestrategie voor het hoger onderwijs en onderzoek*

August 2003

The Social and Economic Council in the Netherlands

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1 Request for opinion

The knowledge-based economy requires us to invest in higher education and research. If the Netherlands is to be in the forefront in Europe, it will have to take more vigorous measures than it has done in recent years. Failure to do so will mean falling behind. It is vital to come up with a strategy for innovation in Dutch higher education and research. That is the main message of the opinion paper *Generating knowledge, sharing knowledge: towards an innovation strategy for higher education and research*, adopted by the Social and Economic Council on Friday 25 April 2003.

The opinion paper is in response to a request for a Council opinion submitted on 5 November 2002 by the State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Ms Annette Nijs. She asked the Council to advise the Cabinet on the implications of various trends and changes in society for higher education and research, the main issue being the division of duties and responsibilities within the higher education system. The State Secretary is particularly interested in the Council's views on five topics:

- 1 the responsiveness of higher education and how it can be enhanced;
- 2 whether or not differentiation is possible in higher education;
- 3 the way in which the higher education market is regulated;
- 4 the Netherlands' response to European policy;
- 5 the implications of the "innovation norm", whereby expenditure on R&D is to amount to 3% of the Netherlands' GDP by 2010, with two-thirds of this amount being financed by the private sector.

The opinion paper will be used as input for the Higher Education and Research Plan (Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoeks Plan, HOOP), due to be presented in January 2004. The HOOP is a policy document in which the Education Minister sets out broad education and research policy intentions for the next four years. In drafting this policy, the Minister consults universities, colleges of professional education and other interested parties. The plan is ultimately adopted by Parliament.

2 Policy challenges

The basic premise of the opinion paper is that the Netherlands aims to be in the forefront of Europe's knowledge-based economy in 2010. The Dutch Cabinet has linked this ambition to the European Union's Lisbon Agenda; in 2000, the European Council agreed in Lisbon that by 2010 it would make the European Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".

At its present position midway down in the European rankings, the Netherlands is still far from meeting its aim of being in the forefront of Europe's knowledge-based economy, and indeed runs a real risk of slipping farther down the list if specific steps are not taken. Other countries are not standing by idly; they understand how vital it is to have a strong knowledge-based economy in a world in which international trends increasingly influence national ones. In recent years, the lack of specific measures has dealt a serious blow to the Netherlands' credibility in this respect.

The Council is greatly concerned about this situation. It has observed that the general public and politicians appear to be remarkably unaware of the urgent need to take steps, that the country's ambitions are nothing more than pipe dreams, and that in reality, the Netherlands is getting by on past investments. Soon it will fall even farther behind. The Council is convinced that investing in higher education and research is a necessary first step if the Netherlands is to avoid ending up at the bottom of the list. However, investment alone will not be enough to actually improve its current position.

The opinion paper sets out the building blocks for an innovation strategy for higher education and research. Its strategy focuses not only on generating knowledge, but also on sharing it; it goes beyond mere investment, aiming instead to improve the return on that investment and to turn vague ambitions into clear-cut choices. In recent years, higher education policy has emphasised increasing the autonomy of the institutions involved. The Council sees this as a positive development, but believes that what is also required is more public accountability and a policy of encouraging collaboration as well as competition, so that choices of national strategic importance can be made.

3 General view

The Council has broken its proposed innovation strategy down into six basic components which are inextricably linked with one another. Taken together, they form a well-balanced and coherent package of measures. In the Council's view, no single component can be eliminated.

It is, in the *first* place, high time for the government to start taking explicit action on the Lisbon agenda and for it to declare its aim of being in the forefront of Europe and set itself a realistic number of specific targets. Two highly appropriate targets are to counter the drop-out rate and promote science and technical courses. It is vital that the innovation agenda for higher education and research is coordinated with the innovation agenda for the knowledge-based economy. With the European Higher Education and Research Area providing a context, the government will need to make certain choices with respect to promoting clusters and policy targets. It must involve all the relevant parties in setting a national policy framework that will guide higher education and research in the right direction.

Second, public funding of undergraduate higher education is and will continue to be necessary¹. The major benefits to society derived from investing in higher education and research justify continuing to fund them from the public purse. It is the government's duty to ensure that higher education and research are properly funded, with the basic premise being to maintain quality and access.

Third, if the Netherlands is to be in the forefront of European knowledge-based economies, it is imperative that extra public funds be invested in higher education and research. The Council believes that such extra investment will pay for itself many times over, even though – or perhaps precisely because – economic conditions are unfavourable. The Council is in favour of measures that will give institutions more financial leeway and proposes the strategic, dedicated deployment of additional public funds in a way that will elicit or support private investment, thereby boosting the development of the knowledge-based economy and knowledge-intensive society directly. The Council assumes that the quality of higher education will be served by making extra, dedicated investments aimed at supporting innovation and promoting excellence.

Fourth, the Council believes that institutions can increase their financial leeway themselves by making substantial improvements in efficiency and by cutting down on bureaucratic red tape. These goals can be achieved in two ways: by introducing a sound macro-efficiency policy and by encouraging institutions to put their internal affairs in

1 Annex 1 is a diagram of the Dutch education system, much of which is government funded.

order and to make choices. The institutions themselves can demonstrate efficiency improvements by enhancing the pluralized system of public accountability. The Council would urge them to create an institutional basis for their efficiency efforts in the public accountability system. A significant improvement in their “internal yield” (i.e. the number of students that pass courses) is the first, vital, step towards offering added value and attracting extra investment. The European perspective can provide the basis; the focus must be on collaboration and mutual coordination at home as means to make Dutch institutions more competitive in Europe and to create scope for promising new activities.

Fifth, in view of the enormous individual benefit that students derive from higher education and the urgent need for extra investment, the Council regards it as reasonable to consider a limited increase in students’ tuition fees in addition to the increase in public funding for higher education. The Council believes that combining sound basic financing, substantial improvements in the “internal yield” and specific quality incentives justifies a limited increase in student tuition fees. However, in order to ensure that higher education remains fully accessible, tuition fees should only be raised after student financial aid has been adjusted accordingly. It will therefore be necessary to review any increase in tuition fees by looking specifically at the government’s duty to maintain quality and access to higher education, at the potential external effects of raising tuition fees, and at the fact that the Netherlands already requires students to pay the highest tuition fees in Europe. Any increase in tuition fees cannot therefore be too extreme. Another point to investigate is the possibility of offering loan facilities on favourable terms so as to encourage investment in “human capital”.

Any increase in tuition fees must, in the Council’s view, be proportionate to the increase in government investment in higher education and research and must certainly not be regarded as a substitute for such investment. On the contrary, tuition fees must only be increased if public investment in higher education is increased as well. After all, the Council would like to see institutions gain greater scope, provided that they meet certain, as yet to be specified, conditions. In view of the Lisbon agenda, it is certainly not a proponent of economy measures. One of the conditions is that the institutions must offer better value for money.

Sixth, unlike in the current system, institutions of higher education should be given greater scope to differentiate between the tuition fees charged for different programmes, with both upward and downward adjustments being possible. In proposing this, the Council has bid farewell to the system of standardised, uniform tuition fees. Institutions must be made to justify deviations from the standard in advance, and such deviations will be kept within certain margins. The basic idea is that programmes that charge lower tuition fees can be financed from savings made elsewhere (or, for example, from third-party contributions) and that programmes that charge higher tuition fees must offer clear and demonstrable added value.

In this system, the government should itself be allowed to lower the tuition fees charged for a particular programme (and provide the institution with compensation) for reasons of public interest or within the content of a specific policy. The Council assumes that institutions will give serious consideration to the public interest when determining tuition fees (partly from the perspective of corporate social responsibility) and will present sound arguments for its decisions within its own pluralized system of public accountability which encompasses its entire set of policies.

Implementing the foregoing package of measures will require a differentiated policy which holds all the parties involved to account. The Council would emphasise once again that none of the six policy principles described above can or should be considered in isolation, as this would lead to an improper interpretation of the joint responsibility borne by all the parties involved.

The Council further joins the European Commission in believing that significant growth in overall investment must be generated mainly by combining more, and more specific, public funding with higher levels of private financing. The Commission has noted in this context that the lack of funding in European higher education is largely the result of the relatively minor contribution made from private sources (companies and individuals) to supplement (and not to replace) public funding, which guarantees the continuity of the European social model in education and vocational training.

4 Innovation agenda

The Council's innovation agenda for higher education and research is presented below in the form of three strategies: the basic, the horizontal and the vertical strategy.

4.1 Basic strategy

The Council's basic strategy mainly targets the government and its duty to provide adequate basic funding for higher education.

The Council observes that higher education has been confronted by a succession of economy measures in recent years which have seriously eaten into the funding per student. It believes that the government would do well to start taking action on the goal that it set for itself in the Lisbon European Council by developing a long-term strategy for education and research. In view of the specific role that higher education plays in the knowledge-based economy, extra investment is crucial.

The Council currently sees no reason to propose definitive and drastic changes to the *funding system* for higher education, in part because this system already encompasses clear demand-driven elements. A demand-driven system of financing – with financing ultimately intended for the institution being passed through the channel of students in the form of vouchers or entitlements – carries too many uncertainties for now for students, institutions and the government. The Council therefore recommends exploring alternative methods of financing within the current funding system by creating scope for experimentation, for example with vouchers in higher education. If these experiments demonstrate that a demand-driven system of financing has a favourable impact on education, and that the current uncertainties are largely put to rest, the Council will consider revising its viewpoint.

The Council would refer once more to its earlier plea to link funding more directly to the education provided or to educational performance. Such a move would be highly compatible with the new Bachelor/Master structure¹ and furthermore ensure that giving students the liberty to obtain credits at other colleges or universities will also result in compensation for the government-funded institutions that award the credits.

The Council believes that the Education Minister should monitor the *macro-efficiency* of higher education more closely, as the institutions themselves will ultimately give precedence to micro-rationality. Nevertheless, the institutions are themselves responsible for ensuring that the programmes and courses they offer match demand.

¹ Annex 2 describes the Bachelor/Master structure as it now exists in the Netherlands.

Macro-efficiency parameters should be set for both the new and existing range of programmes. In this paper, the Council sets out a procedure whereby an advisory committee is charged with checking macro-efficiency at regular intervals by looking at discrepancies between supply and demand in higher education.

In the Council's view, *undergraduate higher education* is a government responsibility and should remain so as part of the *public education system*. The discussion surrounding the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has led the Council to conclude that the intended liberalisation of the services market does not necessarily imply that the Netherlands should turn its market for higher education – including public higher education – into a private market. The Cabinet and the EU should make every effort in the negotiations to prevent the public system of higher education from being subject to liberalisation under the GATS.

The Council also does not support the idea of opening the publicly-funded education system entirely to private, commercial providers, at least not at the present time. For a better understanding of the potential consequences, it would suggest experimenting with this idea first.

4.2 Horizontal strategy

The Council's horizontal strategy focuses mainly on the institutions and involves making certain efforts in exchange for the government's extra investment, which such efforts are designed to enhance.

The main aim of the horizontal strategy is to increase the efficiency of the Dutch system of higher education and to cut down on bureaucratic red tape. There must be substantial improvements in the internal yield. Every institution must itself take responsibility for meeting the targets of this strategy and for accounting for its actions (pluralized system of public accountability). The institutions must make their funds go farther by adopting more efficient working methods and by making strategic choices concerning their own specialisation profile, so that they can create fertile ground for the vertical strategy. They will also be required to obtain more funding from private sources, for example by matching their provision of courses to the private demand for lifelong learning. This horizontal strategy also creates scope for increasing the amount paid by students in tuition fees and for giving institutions more freedom to charge differing tuition fees for different courses, within certain margins.

The horizontal strategy is designed to resolve serious problems in higher education, for example the low internal yield and the less-than-satisfactory relationship between education and industry. The basic idea would be to use extra public and private investment and improvements in the yield and in efficiency to leverage the Netherlands to the top echelons in Europe.

To avoid fragmentation and overlapping, the Council believes that collaboration is necessary between colleges of higher professional education and between universities. Such collaboration will also ensure that the Dutch education system will deliver the quality required to guarantee and improve the country's position in the knowledge-based economy. Concentration and differentiation can create enough "critical mass" to compete in Europe.

The Council argues in favour of developing a benchmark for programmes and institutions based on a number of criteria (for example internal yield figures and the results of official reviews). The benchmark should be developed at short notice and be updated every year. It is compatible with the Council's earlier proposal to improve the pluralized system of public accountability, and would provide a clear understanding of how colleges and universities act on their role as expertise centres, which research has shown is far from optimal.

4.3 Vertical strategy

The Council's vertical strategy focuses on using the additional public and private investment explicitly to promote promising, innovative activities. The initiative would preferably be taken by the institutions, working in partnership with industry.

Institutions must be encouraged to achieve excellence in research and the programmes related to that research. The *desire for excellence* requires them to be discriminating about quality. They must take the European Higher Education and Research Area as their context, and formulate their goals within that context. The necessary shift in perspective is taking too long and only in fits and starts. The Council therefore advises the government to pursue an active policy to encourage this change. Specific instruments can be used to guide developments, for example tax incentives and the conditions attaching to them (for example, in connection with the desired critical mass or collaboration in consortiums).

The Council believes that extra investment from the public coffers is necessary to improve the position of the Netherlands. It would argue in favour of using funding *for very specific purposes* in a limited number of selected fields. The government can once again monitor matters closely by setting stringent conditions, for example with respect to collaboration between institutions and between institutions and companies. Another logical step would be to review the plans that are submitted for their usefulness to society and added value within the international context, among other matters.

Thorough analysis should reveal which fields or disciplines the Netherlands should excel in (clustering, policy targets) and what role these play in the European Research Area. It is important to involve industry and other relevant stakeholders in indicating the direction in which higher education and research should develop. Such involvement can

result in a national policy framework that facilitates strategic choices, specialisation and differentiation in higher education and research. A national policy framework can also provide the context for dedicated private and public investment in higher education and research. Finland has set up a successful consultative body chaired by the prime minister and made up of the relevant ministers, universities and captains of industry. Any Dutch version of the Finnish model should also include representatives from other relevant organisations, in the Council's view.



ANNEXES

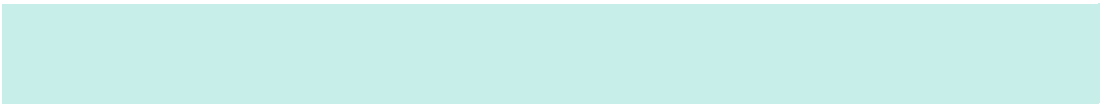
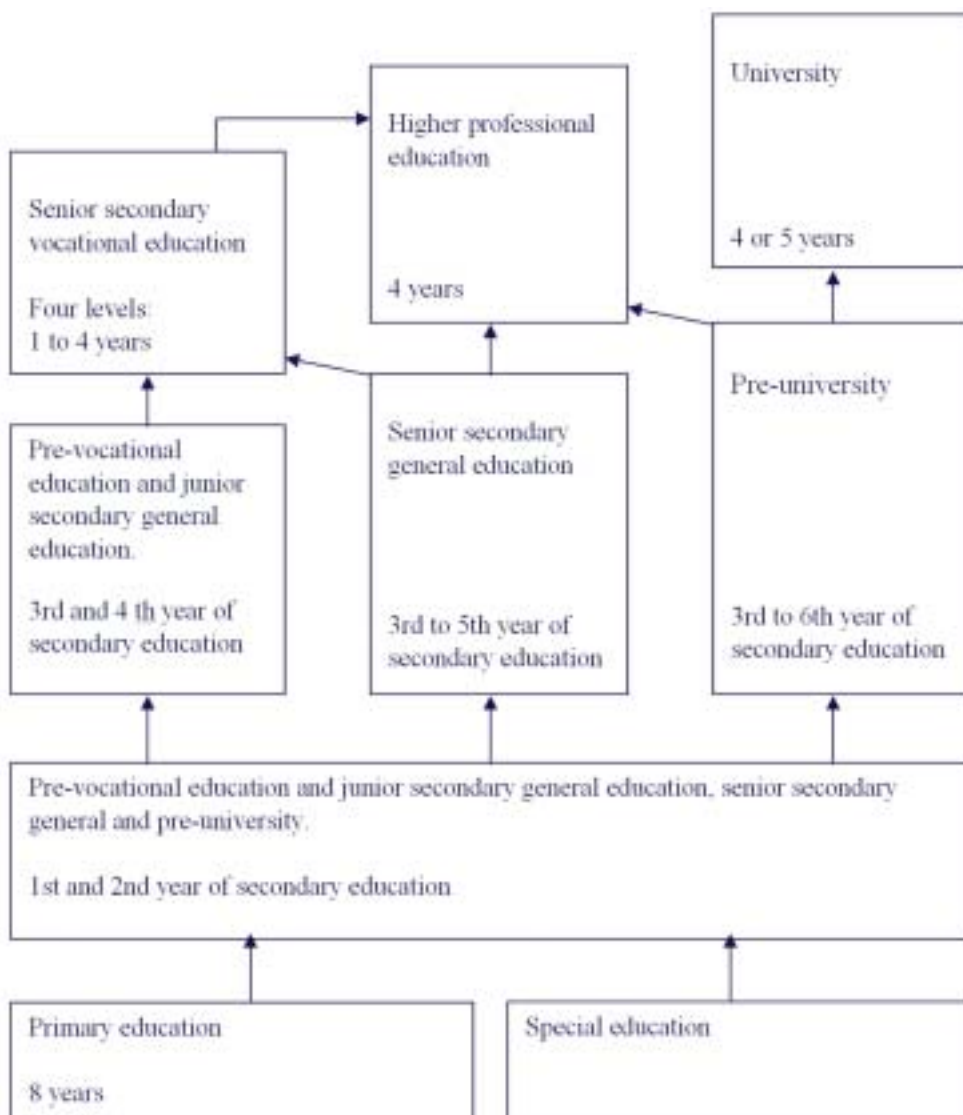
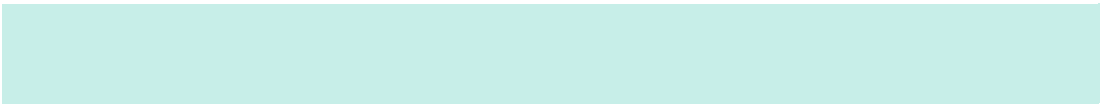


Diagram of the Dutch public education system





The Dutch bachelor/master structure

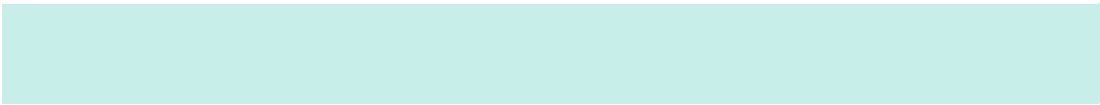
The Netherlands introduced the Bachelor/Master structure (BaMa) in higher education in June 2002. Colleges of professional education and universities have been permitted to adopt this system since the 2002/2003 academic year, and indeed, most of these institutions have done so.

The BaMa system is in keeping with the agreements made in Bologna in 1999 by 29 European countries, in which they committed themselves to creating a single European Higher Education Area in the next ten years. Essentially, the higher education system in each of these countries will soon be based on two cycles, undergraduate and graduate. The international comparability of educational programmes will be based not on their length, but rather on the final level the students achieve.

In 2002, all colleges of professional education became four-year Bachelor's programmes. Students enrolled in these programmes learn specific vocational skills. Many colleges also offer a Master's programme following on from the Bachelor's. Students generally pay for the Master's programme themselves. Many of the Bachelor's degrees awarded by colleges of professional education also satisfy the requirements for admission to a university Master's programme (after the student completes the other prerequisites by taking a special course).

The university Bachelor's programmes last three years. The focus in these programmes is on academic training, but students who have obtained their university Bachelor's degrees are not considered to have had a full academic education. The degree is their ticket to a Master's programme, which may be more or less specialist in nature. University Master's programmes take one to two years, depending on the programme itself. In addition, there are also post-graduate Master's programmes (which are not government funded); these are intended to provide advanced training for students who have worked in the field for some years after completing their undergraduate programme.

To make the Dutch system more compatible with the rest of Europe, the old credit system has been replaced by the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). A full year of study now equals 60 ECTS credits. Students must earn a total of 180 credits for a Bachelor's degree and 60, 120 or more credits for a Master's degree.



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