

Opinion paper on higher education and research

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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 advice on the 2003 Higher Education and Research Plan (*Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan*, HOOP) submitted in November 2002 by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Maria Van der Hoeven. The HOOP is a policy document in which the 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.

The basic premise of the opinion is that the Netherlands aims to be in the forefront of the European knowledge-based economy in 2010. In 2000, the European Council agreed in Lisbon to 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".

The Council is greatly concerned about the present position of the Netherlands midway down in the European rankings. There is also a real risk of the Netherlands slipping farther down the list if specific steps are not taken. Other countries are not sitting by idly; they are showing where their priorities lie by investing more in education and research, even though -- or perhaps precisely because -- the economy is slowing down.

If the Netherlands wishes to avoid falling even further behind, it must take the necessary initial step of investing in higher education and research. More than that is required to improve the country's position, however. The opinion paper sets out the building blocks for an innovation strategy for higher education and research. The Council has broken the strategy down into six points which, taken together, form a well-balanced and coherent package of measures:

1. It is high time for the government to start taking explicit action on the Lisbon agenda and for it to declare its aims and set itself a realistic number of specific targets. Vision is required in order to take decisions. Such vision will emerge in consultation with all the relevant actors involved and will be given shape within a national policy framework.
2. It is the government's task to ensure that higher education and research are properly funded. The major benefits to society derived from investing in higher education and research justify continuing to fund them from the public purse.

3. It is imperative that extra public funds be invested in higher education and research. If the Netherlands is to be in the forefront in Europe, it will have to do more than maintain the status quo. The Council argues in favour of the strategic, dedicated use of these extra funds.
4. In view of the urgent need for extra funding in higher education, the Council considers it reasonable to raise students' tuition fees on the proviso that the government will also contribute extra funds. In order to ensure that higher education remains accessible, tuition fees should only be raised after student financial aid has been adjusted accordingly.
5. Institutions of higher education and research should, under certain conditions, be allowed enough scope to differentiate between the tuition fees charged for different programmes. What is vital is that students understand the relationship between higher tuition fees and the quality of a programme.
6. The institutions must make a major effort to increase efficiency and make it more manifest through a pluralised system of public accountability. Cooperation and mutual coordination will be needed in order to face down the competition in Europe more effectively and to create scope for promising new activities.