



**National summary sheets on
education systems in Europe
and ongoing reforms**

2005 Edition





SUMMARY SHEETS ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

The Netherlands

I. Description of education system

1. Education population and language of instruction

The total population of the Netherlands is 16,2 million people. In 2003 the total number of participants in government-funded education was 3,578 million pupils and students.

The general language of instruction is standard **Dutch**. In the province of Friesland **Frisian** has an official status. Schools in Friesland teach both in Dutch and Frisian. **Other living local dialects**, such as Lower-Saxon, may be used as the language of instruction at educational establishments in areas where they are spoken alongside standard Dutch.

2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education

According to the Constitution people have the right to found schools and to provide teaching based on religious, ideological or educational beliefs. As a result there are both publicly run and privately run schools in the Netherlands. Some 70% of pupils attend privately run schools.

Public and private schools are statutory equal. This means that government expenditure on public education must be matched by spending on private education. The freedom to organise teaching gives private schools freedom to determine what is taught and in what way. This freedom is however limited by the qualitative standards set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in educational legislation.

A distinctive feature of the Dutch education system is the combination of a centralised education policy with decentralised administration and management of schools.

Central government controls education by means of regulations and legislation, taking due account of the provisions of the Constitution. Its prime responsibilities with regard to education relate to the structuring and funding of the system, the management of public-authority institutions, inspection, examinations and student support. Central government also promotes innovation in education. The Minister is, moreover, responsible for the coordination of science policy and for cultural and media policy.

Primary and secondary education deal with management at regional and local level. Both schools differ in management at school level.

The involvement of the **provincial authorities** mainly takes the form of statutory supervisory and judicial duties. The Provincial Council ensures the availability of adequate numbers of publicly run primary and secondary schools and acts as the appeal body for private schools with regard to decisions taken by the municipal authorities. With regard to the management of schools and the curriculum, the role of the provinces is limited, partly because they cannot be the competent authority of an educational institution.

The **municipal authorities** are the local authority for all schools in the area, whether publicly or privately run.

General administration at school level

Both **private and public schools (primary and secondary education)** have a legally recognised competent authority, also referred to as the school board. The competent authority administers and manages the school or schools for which it is responsible (all material aspects of the organisation of a school, determining policy on the curriculum, personnel matters and the admission of pupils). The competent authority is responsible for what goes on in the school insofar as this is governed by statutory regulations.

Some of its powers may be delegated to the school head, but responsibility continues to lie with the competent authority.

- In the case of public primary and secondary schools, the municipal executive may act as the competent authority. Alternatively, the municipal council has been able, since 1997, to opt to delegate the tasks performed by the municipal authorities as the competent authority of publicly run schools to some other type of body governed by public law.
- The competent authority of private schools is an administrative body governed by private law. There are two types of school board or competent authority: associations and foundations, the latter being the most common.

There are no intermediate levels of management between government and **adult and vocational education institutions**.

Institutions for higher professional education and universities are fully autonomous.

The **Education Inspectorate**, for which the Minister of Education, Culture and Science is responsible, supervises the quality of education. The Inspectorate bases its assessments on the principle that the institutions themselves bear primary responsibility for the quality of teaching.

3. Pre-primary education

Almost all 4-year-olds (99.3%) in the Netherlands attend primary school, although this is not compulsory until children reach the age of 5.

The Netherlands does not offer education for the age group up to 4 years old (formally 5 years old).

4. Compulsory full-time education

(a) Phases

Primary education (<i>Primair onderwijs</i>) Primary education consists of <i>Basisschool</i> (primary school) and <i>Speciale school voor basisonderwijs</i> (special school for primary education)	Age 5-12
Secondary education (<i>Voortgezet onderwijs</i>) Pre-university education (<i>Voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i> , consisting of <i>gymnasium</i> and <i>atheneum</i> – VWO)	Age 12-18
Senior general secondary education (<i>Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i> – HAVO)	Age 12-17
Pre-vocational secondary education (<i>Voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i>)	Age 12-16
Special secondary education (<i>Speciaal voortgezet onderwijs</i>)	Age 12-18/20

Every child must attend school full time from the first school day of the month following its fifth birthday. Children must attend school full time for 12 full school years and, in any event, until the end of the school year in which they turn 16. Young people are then required to attend an institution providing courses for this purpose for at least two days a week for another year. Those who have a practical training contract in a particular sector of employment attend classes one day a week on a day release basis and work the rest of the week.

Compulsory education up to the age of 16 is free of charge, although in secondary schools the parents bear the costs of schoolbooks.

(b) Admission criteria

- Primary education:
 - o Children must be aged at least 4 to enter primary school.
 - o Primary education is free of charge.
- Secondary education:
 - o Pupils are admitted to secondary school after leaving primary school or a special school for primary education, at an average age of 12.
 - o Decisions on admission to VMBO, HAVO or VWO are made by the competent authority (school board), which may appoint an admissions board to take such decisions in its behalf. The admissions board consists of the head and one or more teachers from the school. It may also include heads and teachers from primary schools. The head of the pupil's primary school is required to draw up a report on his or her educational potential and level of attainment (educational report).
 - o For admission to VMBO, HAVO and VWO, pupils are assessed to establish their suitability. Most common is to test pupils the final year of primary school, using tests developed centrally to measure pupils' level of knowledge and understanding.

(c) Length of the school day/week/year

The school year comprises at least 200 days between August and June. Schools open five days a week, but Wednesday afternoon is generally free in primary education.

Primary education

The total minimum figure for the first four years is 3,520 periods and for the last four years 4,000 periods. The school day may last a maximum of 5.5 hours (excluding breaks), with an even spread of activities during the day. This may, however, be extended in connection with additional activities designed to prevent and/or eliminate educational disadvantage. Pupils receive an average of 22 hours' teaching per week during the first two years of schooling and an average of 25 hours a week in the last six years. It is up to the competent authority of the school (school board) to decide when the school day starts and ends and how long the lessons last.

Secondary education

During the first three years of secondary education - the period of basic secondary education - the recommended number of periods is intended to serve as a guideline within which it is possible to achieve the attainment targets. The tables assume that teaching periods last 50 minutes and that the attainment targets can be achieved in 75% of the time recommended for each subject. Schools do not need to follow the tables exactly, since the attainment targets can be achieved in 75% of the time. A total of at least 3,000 50-minute periods must, however, be provided in the subjects of the core curriculum.

There is a compulsory minimum number of periods for social studies, arts subjects and physical education in VMBO, HAVO and VWO.

The 4th schoolyear in both HAVO and VWO is part of compulsory education, though it is part of upper secondary education, including the content of education and the number of periods (see 5).

(d) Class size/student grouping

There are no recommendations concerning class size. Students are grouped by age in mixed ability classes. Classes in primary schools have one teacher for all subjects; pupils in secondary schools have separate subject teachers.

(e) Curricular control and content

The Ministry of Education determines the overall curriculum and details of compulsory subjects. Schools devise their curricular plan and teaching methods and select materials.

Primary education

Compulsory areas of learning at primary level include sensory co-ordination and physical exercise, Dutch, arithmetic and mathematics, English, a number of factual subjects, including geography, history, science (including biology), social structures (including political studies) and religious and ideological movements, expressive activities, social and life skills and healthy living. Schools are free to decide how much time is spent on the various areas of the curriculum, and when. The only restriction is the minimum number of teaching periods per year.

Secondary education

- 1st – 3rd Year

During the first three years of secondary school (the period of basic secondary education) pupils are taught a compulsory core curriculum of 15 subjects (1,000 periods of 50 minutes per year. The remaining 20% of teaching time (840 hours) may be used by schools for lessons and other educational activities at their own discretion.

In the first three years of secondary school pupils must be taught for at least 1,280 periods of 50 minutes per year.

Tables have been published giving the recommended number of periods to be spent on each subject, assuming that one period lasts 50 minutes.

A third modern language is compulsory in the first three years of HAVO and VWO, while the *gymnasium* (part of VWO) curriculum must also include Latin or Greek.

- 4th year

○ In VMBO the 4th year is part of lower secondary education as well. The recommended timetable covers all 4 years of the course, the 3 preceding years of basic secondary education included.

○ In both HAVO and VWO the 4th year is part of compulsory education, though it is part of upper secondary education, including the content of the curriculum (see 5).

(f) Assessment, progression and qualifications

Continuous teacher assessment takes place throughout primary and secondary education.

Primary education:

At the end of primary school, a student's report records his/her achievement and advises on secondary school choice. Most schools - i.e. 90% - use national tests to measure the pupils' end results. There are no statutory rules about progression. Repeating a year is possible, but schools aim to ensure an uninterrupted process of development.

Secondary education:

During basic secondary education, pupils may have to repeat a year.

Only VMBO falls completely under compulsory education. The VMBO leaving examination is in 2 parts: a school examination and a national examination.

5. Upper secondary and post-secondary education

(a) Types of education

Pre-university education (<i>Vorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs</i> – VWO)	Age 12-18
Senior general secondary education (<i>Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs</i> – HAVO)	Age 12-17
Secondary vocational education (<i>Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs</i> – MBO)	Age 16-17/18/19/20

(b) Admission criteria

- Pupils in the first stage of HAVO and VWO can continue their education in those types of education in upper secondary education;

- VMBO pupils who have successfully completed the theoretical programme can transfer to the 4th year of HAVO, provided their examination subjects included mathematics and either French or German (English is a compulsory VMBO subject). For some specialised components there are additional requirements;
- Pupils with HAVO certificates may be admitted to the 5th year of VWO;
- MBO: Under the qualification structure the admission criteria are:
 - for a course at assistant or basic vocational training level anyone is able to enrol, without any requirements regarding previous education;
 - for a course at professional or middle-management level:
 - a certificate of pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) or;
 - a certificate of junior general secondary education (MAVO) or;
 - proof that the first three years of senior general secondary education (HAVO) or pre-university education (VWO) have been successfully completed;
 - for a course at specialist level: admission is possible with a professional training qualification for the same occupation or occupational group.

Block or day release courses (BBL) are open to persons above school leaving age only.

(c) Curricular control and content

General Secondary Education (HAVO and VWO)

Pupils entering the 4th year of HAVO and the 5th year of VWO have to choose one of the the following subject combinations:

- culture and society
- economics and society
- science and health
- science and technology

Each group of subjects includes:

- a common component which is the same for all pupils, apart from chosen subject combinations. This component takes up just under half of the time of the curriculum.
- a specialised component, taking up just over one third of the curriculum and consisting of subjects relating to the chosen subject combination.
- an optional component which takes up the remaining time of the curriculum. Pupils are free to choose from the subjects offered by the school, including subjects provided through an arrangement with other schools. The number of optional subjects depends on the study load in the specialised component.

Curricular control is the school's responsibility.

Secondary Vocational Education (MBO)

The courses that make up the national qualification structure for vocational education are divided into four levels. Students can take these courses consecutively, the diploma from one course serving as the entry requirement for the next.

For each course there are in principle two learning pathways:

- vocational training (BOL) where practical training will take up between 20% and 60% of the course;
- block or day release (BBL) where practical training will take up more than 60% of the course.

The curricula in the qualification structure vary according to the content of the course; 700 qualifications have been registered at the moment.

(d) Assessment, progression and qualifications

In **general secondary education**, the school-leaving examinations for HAVO and VWO are in two parts: a national examination held in the final year and a school exam. For some subjects there is a school exam only.

In **secondary vocational education**, pupils are awarded leaving certificates for partial examinations they have passed. After they have passed all tests for the course and acquired the accompanying certificates, the certificates are replaced by a diploma. It is up to the institutions themselves to organise courses and teaching in such a way that students are able to obtain a diploma.

6. Higher education

(a) Types of institution

The Netherlands has a binary system of higher education

- university education (*wetenschappelijk onderwijs* = WO), offered by universities;
- higher professional education (*hoger beroepsonderwijs* = HBO), offered by HBO institutions (*hogescholen*: universities of professional education).

(b) Access

Admission requirements for **higher professional education** are:

- a senior general secondary education (HAVO) certificate or;
- a MBO middle-management or specialist training certificate or;
- a pre-university education (VWO) certificate.

Persons aged 21 or over who do not possess the required qualifications may be admitted after passing a special entrance examination. This age limit may be waived in the case of courses in the fine and performing arts.

Admission to **university** is possible with a pre-university (VWO) school-leaving certificate or a HBO qualification or HBO propaedeutic certificate. Persons aged 21 or over who do not possess the required qualifications may be admitted after passing a special entrance examination.

(c) Qualifications

In **higher professional education**, a bachelor's or master's degree is conferred on students who pass the final examination of an HBO bachelor's or master's course. Graduates are entitled to use the appropriate academic titles.

In the new system, HBO institutions are now able to offer master's courses leading to a master's degree.

Every **university** course includes a bachelor's examination and a master's examination. A separate examining board is set up for each study programme to conduct the examinations and organise and coordinate the interim examinations. The faculty council draws up the teaching and examination regulations after consulting the relevant examining board and study programme committee. Students who pass the final examinations are awarded a certificate listing the different parts of the examination and, where appropriate, the professional qualification obtained.

Courses which are geared to specific occupations in particular must include practical preparation for professional practice. This applies to the courses for doctors, dentists, veterinary surgeons, architects and pharmacists.

A bachelor's or master's degree is conferred by the institution on students who pass the final examination of a bachelor's or master's course. Graduates are entitled to use the titles "Bachelor" or "Master", abbreviated to "B." and "M." and placed after the name. They may opt to use a Dutch title instead of the relevant international title.

7. Special needs

Special education consists of 2 groups of schools:

- Special schools for primary education (*speciale scholen voor basisonderwijs*), for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, learning and developmental difficulties. Since 1991 policy has been geared to integrating children with special needs in mainstream primary schools. The aim of this policy is twofold. Firstly, to enable pupils with special needs

to attend mainstream primary schools. Secondly, to control costs by awarding a set budget to consortia of ordinary schools and special schools for primary education, from which the latter schools and special facilities at ordinary primary schools are to be funded.

- Special schools (*speciaal onderwijs*) providing special education for disabled children and children whose education requires a special approach, catering for either the primary or secondary age group or both (called special schools).

8. Teachers

Primary school teachers completed a four-year course at an HBO institution. They are qualified to teach: all subjects and all age groups at primary level; in special education at both primary and secondary level; in adult and vocational education.

Secondary school teachers are trained at HBO institutions and universities.

- HBO teacher training courses

HBO teacher training courses for secondary school teachers lead to either a grade one or grade two qualification. Courses are available in general subjects, arts subjects, technical subjects and agricultural subjects. Students specialise in one subject. HBO teacher training courses cover both subject training and aspects of teaching in general.

- o Grade two teachers are qualified to teach the first three years of HAVO and VWO and all years of VMBO and secondary vocational education.
- o Grade one teachers are qualified to teach at all levels of secondary education, including the last two or three years of HAVO and VWO respectively.

- University based teacher training courses

University graduates with a “doctoraal” or master’s degree can take a postgraduate teacher training course (ULO) leading to a grade one qualification. Students can also begin, and, if they wish, complete their teacher training while they are still undergraduates.

Courses are available in all subjects of the curriculum of secondary education. Students specialise in one subject, sometimes with an extra qualification to teach a subject like general science or culture and the arts. Graduates from university-based teacher training courses have a grade one qualification. They may teach at all levels of secondary education.

II. Ongoing Reforms and Topics of Debate in education

Primary education

- A bill is currently in preparation which will give schools more flexibility regarding their timetables. They will still have to provide at least 7,520 teaching periods over the eight years that children attend school, but matters such as the distribution of periods between the first and the last four years will be more flexible;
- The government plans to introduce block grant funding in order to give schools more freedom in terms of spending. School boards will be given a certain budget and the freedom to decide on the spending. Expectations are that this measure will be introduced in August 2006.

Secondary education

Based on an Inspectorate's evaluation and recommendations of the Education Council, basic secondary education will be adapted. A task force formulated recommendations for the future of lower secondary education. The minister adopted the proposals on the whole and it is expected that the law that will be based on these recommendations will come into force in August 2006.

Higher education

Experiments will start in the academic years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 with flexible admission of students who do not meet the conditions of preliminary training. These students must have gained, however, knowledge and experience on a comparable level.

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (http://www.eurydice.org)
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