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Principles and general objectives of education

One of the key features of the Dutch education system, guaranteed under article 23 of the Constitution, is freedom of education, intended as the freedom to found schools (freedom of establishment), to organize the teaching in schools (freedom of organization of teaching) and to determine the principles on which they are based (freedom of conviction). People have the right to found schools and to provide teaching based on religious, ideological or educational beliefs. The Constitution places public and private schools on an equal financial footing. The conditions which private schools must satisfy in order to qualify for funding are laid down by law.

The Netherlands is striving to secure a position in the world's top five knowledge economies, with students gaining outstanding academic results. Improved quality of teaching and incentives for better performance are vital if this aim is to be achieved. The government's education policy focuses on creating the conditions under which pupils, students, teachers and institutions can excel. Particular emphasis is placed on core subjects, on increased teaching time, on excellent standards of teaching and on both knowledge and skills. (Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation, 2011).

Laws and other basic regulations concerning education

The **Primary Education Act (WBO)** of 2 July 1981 and the **Secondary Education Act (WVO)** of 14 February 1963, along with their subsequent amendments, constitute the legal framework for primary and secondary education in the country.

Special education and secondary special education have been regulated by the Special Education Interim Act (ISOVSO) since 1985. The duration of the Act was set at ten years, but it was extended by three years until 1 August 1998. In 1994, the Going to School Together Act (WSNS) was enacted providing new rules encompassing peripatetic counselling. In August 1998, the Primary Education Act (WBO) and the Special Education Interim Act (ISOVSO) were converted into the **1998 Primary Education Act (WPO)** and the **Expertise Centres Act (WEC)**. Since then, primary education has covered mainstream primary education, special primary education as referred to in the 1998 Primary Education Act, and special and secondary special education as referred to in the Expertise Centres Act. As of 1 August 1998, secondary special education for students with learning and behavioural difficulties and for students with moderate learning difficulties is covered by the Secondary Education Act (WVO). Education for hospitalized children and youths is covered by separate regulations. The WPO and the WEC contain the objectives of primary education (attainment targets) and prescribe how teaching should be structured and organized (content, quality, school plan, funding, school prospectus, complaints procedure). Rules governing the special needs support structure (special needs plan, consortia) are also included.



The **Benchmarks (Language and Numeracy) Act**, entered into force in August 2010, lays down benchmarks for the knowledge and skills that pupils are expected to have acquired in language and numeracy at different stages in their school career. It provides a general framework for the organization of the curriculum by schools and teachers in primary, secondary, secondary vocational and special education. The benchmarks were introduced to improve pupils' language and numeracy skills, and ensure continuity of learning. Starting from 2013 all pupils in year 8 will have to sit a test to assess their numeracy and language skills. While the attainment targets describe in general terms the skills and knowledge a child must have acquired by the end of primary school, the benchmark levels for mathematics and language specifically prescribe the degree of proficiency that must be attained in any given year of schooling.

The main implementing regulations pertaining to secondary education are: the **Attainment Targets Decree**; the **Secondary Education (Organization of Teaching) Decree**, which regulates teaching in the different types of school, including the admission requirements; and the **Leaving Examinations Decree**, which regulates the choice of examination subjects and stipulates how examination results are to be determined.

The **Education Inspection Act (WOT)**, entered into force on 1 September 2002, applies to the primary, secondary, vocational and adult education sectors and enables the Inspectorate to operate professionally and independently and to give institutions pointers as to how they can improve standards on the basis of their own quality assurance systems. Under the Act, the Inspectorate has a statutory duty to promote the quality of education.

The **Education Professions Act**, entered into force in August 2006, regulates standards of competence for both teachers and other staff in primary education, secondary and adult and vocational education, and pre-higher education. Anyone wanting to become a teacher will need a certificate from an institution of higher professional education or a university showing that the standards of competence laid down by order in council pursuant to the Act are met. The Act also enables schools to devise policy on maintaining the skills of their staff. The provisions of this Act have been incorporated into sectoral legislation and the Inspectorate monitors compliance.

The **Good Education and Good Governance Act**, entered into force in August 2010, enables the government to cut off funding to individual primary or secondary schools in the interests of their pupils if the level of education they provide is consistently poor. The Act formulates minimum quality requirements for all schools.

Higher education is regulated by the **Higher Education and Research Act (WHW)** of 8 October 1992 implemented from 1 September 1993 and subsequent amendments. This Act encompasses general provisions, including the objectives of the institutions for higher education. The Act also contains provisions in the areas of planning and funding, and provisions for collaboration among the various institutions and for the administration and structure of the institutions.



According to the **Act on Accreditation of Higher Education** of 2002, all degree programmes offered by universities and universities of professional education are evaluated according to established criteria, and programmes that meet those criteria will be accredited (i.e. recognized). Only accredited programmes are eligible for government funding and students receive financial aid and graduate with a recognized degree only when taking or after completing an accredited degree programme. Accredited programmes are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education. As of 2002, the responsibilities for quality assurance in higher education have been assigned to the Netherlands Accreditation Organization (NAO), which after the ratification of the treaty with the Flemish Community of Belgium at the end of 2004 became the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO). The NVAO drafted the relevant framework in 2003.

The **Adult and Vocational Education Act** entered into force on 1 January 1996. As a result, existing legal regulations for adult education and vocational education were replaced by a single integral act. The most important acts in this field were the 1991 Adult Education Framework Act (KVE) and the Part-time Vocational Education Act (WCBO, 1993). The new Act was initially designed to bring greater cohesion to the various forms of adult and vocational education. One objective of the Act has been to improve the linkages between education and the labour market. A qualifications structure covers both vocational and adult education – in the first case, with a cohesive educational model and special emphasis on the cultivation of professional practice and, in the second place, with improved opportunities to continue on to vocational education. An amendment to the Act, making provision for personal budgets in vocational education, entered into force in August 2008. Competence-based qualification structures were made compulsory by law in August 2010, and are central to the Adult and Vocational Education Act.

The Education Participation Act (WMO) of 3 December 1992 regulated participation in education with the exception of higher education. On 1 January 2007 the WMO was replaced by the **Participation in School Decision-making Act** (WMS), regulating participation in decision-making in primary and secondary schools, including special schools. The participation council's right to be informed has been strengthened and no important decisions can be taken without its assent or advice.

The **Student Finance Act 2000** (WSF 2000) applies to students in higher education who are under the age of 34 and who began their studies before the age of 30. Every student enrolled on an accredited full-time course in higher education who satisfies the applicable conditions is entitled to a non-means-tested basic grant. Depending on their parents' income, students may be able to claim a supplementary grant in addition to the basic grant.

The Childcare Act entered into force on 1 January 2005 giving childcare its own statutory framework, regulating among others supervision and the funding mechanism. In October 2010 an amendment to the Act introduced quality standards for playgroups, including requirements for staff qualifications (early childhood education workers), language of communication (e.g. Dutch), health and safety assessments, and participation of parents. The Act was renamed **Childcare and Quality Standards for Playgroups Act**. The **Opportunities for Development**



through Quality and Education Act (OKE) came into effect in August 2010. This Act aims to further align playgroups and day nurseries in order to give all children similar opportunities for development regardless of the preschool facility they attend. Within the framework of this Act, municipalities are responsible for providing early childhood education that meets the national quality criteria to all children. Municipalities must use the Local Educational Agenda (LEA) to make agreements on early childhood education with the organizations concerned, such as the boards of playgroups, day nurseries and schools. These agreements should cover such matters as defining the target group, methods of recruiting and enrolling children in early childhood education, ensuring continuity of learning, and the results to be achieved. Early childhood education is supervised by the Education Inspectorate,

Compulsory education is regulated by the **Compulsory Education Act** of 30 May 1968. Education is compulsory from the first school day of the month following the month in which a child reaches the age of 5. Compulsory education continues until the end of the school year in which the pupil reaches the age of 16, or has completed a minimum of twelve school years. Linked to this is a partial education obligation until the age of 18 (attending school at least one day a week). Since September 2007 all young people under 18 years of age are required to attend school until they attain a basic qualification (e.g. a senior general secondary or pre-university education certificate or a senior secondary vocational education certificate Level 2). Young people under the age of 18 who are no longer in full-time education are required to follow a full-time programme combining work and study until they have obtained one of the required certificates. (Eurydice, 2011).

Administration and management of the education system

As mentioned, freedom of education guaranteed under article 23 of the Constitution refers to the freedom to found schools (freedom of establishment), to organize the teaching in schools (freedom of organization of teaching) and to determine the principles on which they are based (freedom of conviction). Everyone has 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. Publicly run schools are open to all children regardless of religion or outlook and provide education on behalf of the state. Public schools are subject to public law and are governed by the municipal council or by a public legal entity or foundation set up by the council. Some publicly run schools base their teaching on specific educational approaches (e.g. the Montessori or Dalton method). Privately run schools are subject to private law and are state-funded although not set up by the state. These schools are governed by the board of the association or foundation that set them up. These so-called denominational schools base their teaching on religious or ideological beliefs. They include Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and other types of schools. The denominational schools can refuse to admit pupils whose parents do not subscribe to the belief or ideology on which the school's teaching is based. The freedom to organize teaching means that private schools are free to determine what is taught and how. This freedom is however limited by the qualitative standards set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in educational legislation. These standards, which apply to both public and private education, prescribe among others the subjects to be studied, the attainment targets or examination syllabuses and the content of national examinations, the number of instructional hours per year, the qualifications which



teachers are required to have, the right for parents and pupils to have a say in school matters, and planning and reporting obligations. The Constitution places public and private schools on an equal financial footing. This means that government expenditure on public education must be matched by spending on private education. The conditions which private schools must satisfy in order to qualify for funding are laid down by law. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2008).

With due regard for the provisions of the Constitution, the central government creates enabling conditions for education through legislation which applies to both publicly and privately run institutions. The involvement of the provincial authorities mainly takes the form of statutory supervisory and judicial duties. As the local authority for all schools in the area, the municipal authorities have certain statutory powers and responsibilities with regard to both public and private schools. All schools, both public and private, are governed by a legally recognized competent authority. Since 1997 the municipal authorities have been able to choose the form the competent authority takes.

The **Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW)** is organized into departments responsible for developing policy on science and on the various sectors of education, namely primary education, secondary education, adult and vocational education, higher education and student finance, and research and science. Other departments, like the international policy department, and the legislation and legal affairs department are responsible for matters affecting all areas of education. The prime responsibilities of the OCW with regard to education relate to the structuring and funding of the system, the management of public-authority institutions, inspection, examinations and student support. The central government also promotes innovation in education. Moreover, the Minister is responsible for the coordination of science policy and for cultural and media policy. Until 2007 childcare policy was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, in March 2007 childcare was transferred under the competence of the Ministry of Education, and in 2011 it was transferred back to the **Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment**. The policy area of gender equality is under the OCW. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, May 2012). The public institutions which provide 'green education' (agriculture sector), including one university, are directly funded by the **Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation**. The statutory advisory bodies of the OCW are the Education Council, the Council for Culture, and the Science and Technology Advisory Council. The **Education Council** advises the government on matters relating to education, such as the main outlines of policy and legislation. It is an independent body which advises the ministers involved both on request and on its own initiative, and answers questions from Parliament. In certain specific cases governed by law, the local authorities may also ask the Council's advice.

Educational supervision is the responsibility of the **Education Inspectorate**, under the authority of the Minister of Education. The Inspectorate is managed by the Inspector-general and several chief inspectors, each of whom is responsible for evaluation in one or more education sectors (primary and special education, secondary education, adult and vocational education and higher education) or the expertise centres, which are responsible for primary and secondary special education. Supervision takes place on the basis of the Constitution and relates to both public and



private education. Under the Education Inspection Act the duties of the Inspectorate are to: assess the quality of teaching on the basis of checks on compliance with legislation; monitor compliance with legislation; promote the quality of teaching; report on the development of education; and perform all other tasks and duties required by law. Under the Primary Education Act, the Secondary Education Act and the Adult and Vocational Education Act, school boards bear primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of teaching. As the competent authority, they are the point of contact for inspections.

Besides the central office at Utrecht, there are twelve inspectorate offices spread throughout the country. Since 1993, the Inspectorate has been responsible for compiling the annual Report on Education, the report from the Minister to Parliament about the state of education. The picture that the inspectorate paints in the Report concerning the quality of education is partly based on the outcome of research from other parties. Separate reports are published on various evaluations. These are intended initially for Parliament, the Minister and the State Secretary, but could also affect public opinion. Since 2004 the Inspectorate has also been responsible for inspecting teaching establishments which fall under the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation. In November 2007, the Education Inspectorate took over responsibility for monitoring the quality of decentralized senior secondary vocational education (MBO) examinations, in accordance with amendments to the Adult and Vocational Education Act and the Education Inspection Act. The Inspectorate's new monitoring system has been in place since January 2008. Institutions which perform well 'earn' the right to less supervision, whereas inspection is intensified at institutions with problems. All primary and secondary schools, including those that are performing well, are inspected at least once every four years. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

The **Central Funding of Institutions Agency** (CFI) is an executive agency responsible for funding educational establishments, research institutes and education support organizations on the basis of legislation and regulations and in accordance with the established financial frameworks. Its duties include gathering, managing and supplying information on these institutions for policy-making and funding purposes. The CFI is also responsible for the Ministry's own accounts. Since 1996 when the CFI acquired agency status, it has formed an autonomous part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

Other national bodies include the **National Institute for Educational Measurement** (CITO) and the **National Institute for Curriculum Development** (SLO). The CITO develops attainment tests for pupils in year 8 which schools can use to measure their end results and compare them with those of other schools (primary school leavers attainment test). CITO also develops tests for measuring the progress of individual pupils (pupil monitoring system) so that teaching can be tailored more to individual needs. The production, distribution and sale of teaching materials is a commercial activity. The **National Teaching Materials Information Centre** (NICL) produces a guide to teaching materials which schools can use to compare existing and new products. The NICL is part of the SLO. The SLO provides independent, professional advice on and support for curriculum innovation, development, and implementation. The National Institute operates in virtually all education sectors, including primary and secondary education, special education, vocational education and teacher education, and covers all subject areas. The Institute's central task is to



advise the government on important education reforms and new curricula. SLO supports and coordinates curriculum development in collaboration with schools and universities, carries out curriculum evaluations, and provides information about teaching materials.

Educational advisory centres include the **Educational Advisory Centre** (APS) for non-denominational schools, the **Protestant Educational Advisory Centre** (CPS), and the Catholic **Educational Advisory Centre** (KPC).

The **Centre for Innovation in Training** (CINOP) is an independent, international research and consultancy agency specialized in lifelong learning, vocational education and training (VET), adult education, career guidance and human resource development. The **Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education** (NUFFIC) is an independent, non-profit organization supporting internationalization in higher education, research and professional education in the Netherlands and abroad, and helping improve access to higher education worldwide.

Under the Higher Education and Research Act, the supervision of higher education institutions is a task of the Education Inspectorate, under the responsibility of the OCW. The system of accreditation aims to guarantee a high standard of quality of programmes offered in higher education. As of 2002, the responsibilities for quality assurance have been assigned to the Netherlands Accreditation Organization (NAO), which after the ratification of the treaty with the Flemish Community of Belgium at the end of 2004 became the **Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization** (NVAO). NVAO is supervised by the Inspectorate. Accredited programmes are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programmes. The **Information Management Group** (IBG) is an autonomous administrative authority with which the OCW has a formal statutory relationship. The IBG is responsible for implementing the Student Finance Act 2000 and the Fees and Educational Expenses (Allowances) Act. Its other duties include the collection of school and course fees, the provision of administrative support for examinations, the placement and registration of prospective students, and the evaluation of diplomas. The IBG is governed by public law and funded directly from the budget of the OCW.

At local levels, the **municipal authorities** checks whether pupils subject to compulsory education have been admitted to schools in their municipalities. The municipalities have a primary task in implementing the Compulsory Education Act. The Act requires each municipality to have one compulsory education officer. In smaller municipalities, this is often combined with other tasks. Municipal authorities also have the following powers and responsibilities: drawing up annual plans for and funding necessary changes in accommodation for primary and secondary schools; adopting annual plans for the provision of new public and private schools at primary and secondary level; allocating resources from the budget for eliminating educational disadvantages and drawing up a local compensatory plan; and implementing the legislation on transport of pupils, imposing their own criteria and conditions within the statutory framework; As of January 2012 there were 415 municipalities in the country.



All schools have a legally recognized competent authority, also referred to as the **school board**. The competent authority administers and manages the school or schools for which it is responsible. Administration entails looking after the material aspects of the organization of a school and, in particular, meeting the running costs and personnel costs. Management involves 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 can opt to delegate the tasks performed by the municipal authorities to some other type of body governed by public law (for example, a governing committee, a legal person governed by public law or a foundation).

Primary, special and secondary education involved a compulsory representative advisory body on the basis of the 1992 Education Participation Act (WMO). The advisory body had several competencies, advisory or approval rights. In 2007 the WMO was replaced by the Participation in School Decision-making Act, regulating participation in decision-making in primary and secondary schools, including special schools. According to the new Act all schools must have a **participation council**; schools could previously plead exemption on religious or ideological principles, but this is no longer possible. The participation council's right to be informed has been strengthened. The board must provide and account for all relevant policy-related and financial information, both independently and at the request of the participation council. The participation council also has more far-reaching powers and no important decisions can be taken without its assent or advice. In addition to a package of joint powers of assent, teachers and parents have been assigned a series of independent powers of assent relating to topics that particularly concern them. In the case of teachers these include conditions of employment; in the case of parents, the size of the parental contribution, for example. The competent authorities need the prior consent of the participation council for decisions affecting such matters as the adoption of or changes to the school's educational aims, the school plan, the curriculum, the special needs plan, the school rules or the complaints procedure, or the transfer of or merger of a school.

The daily administration of primary education and special education schools is the responsibility of the **head teacher**. All schools are legally obligated to compile a plan of action, at least every two years. The school's competent authority compiles it, after receiving approval from the representative advisory body. Among other things, the plan provides insight into methods for evaluating pupils' progress and related reporting procedures. It also describes the educational method. The Inspectorate checks the plan to make sure it meets the legal requirements. All schools compile a plan of action in the form of activities to be established annually. These include school hours, holidays and other free days. The Inspectorate receives the activities plan before the start of the school year.

The daily administration of secondary education schools is the responsibility of the head of the school, known as the **rector** in pre-university education (VWO) schools and in other schools as the **director**. Secondary schools have one or more deputy heads, together forming the management team. The competent authority draws

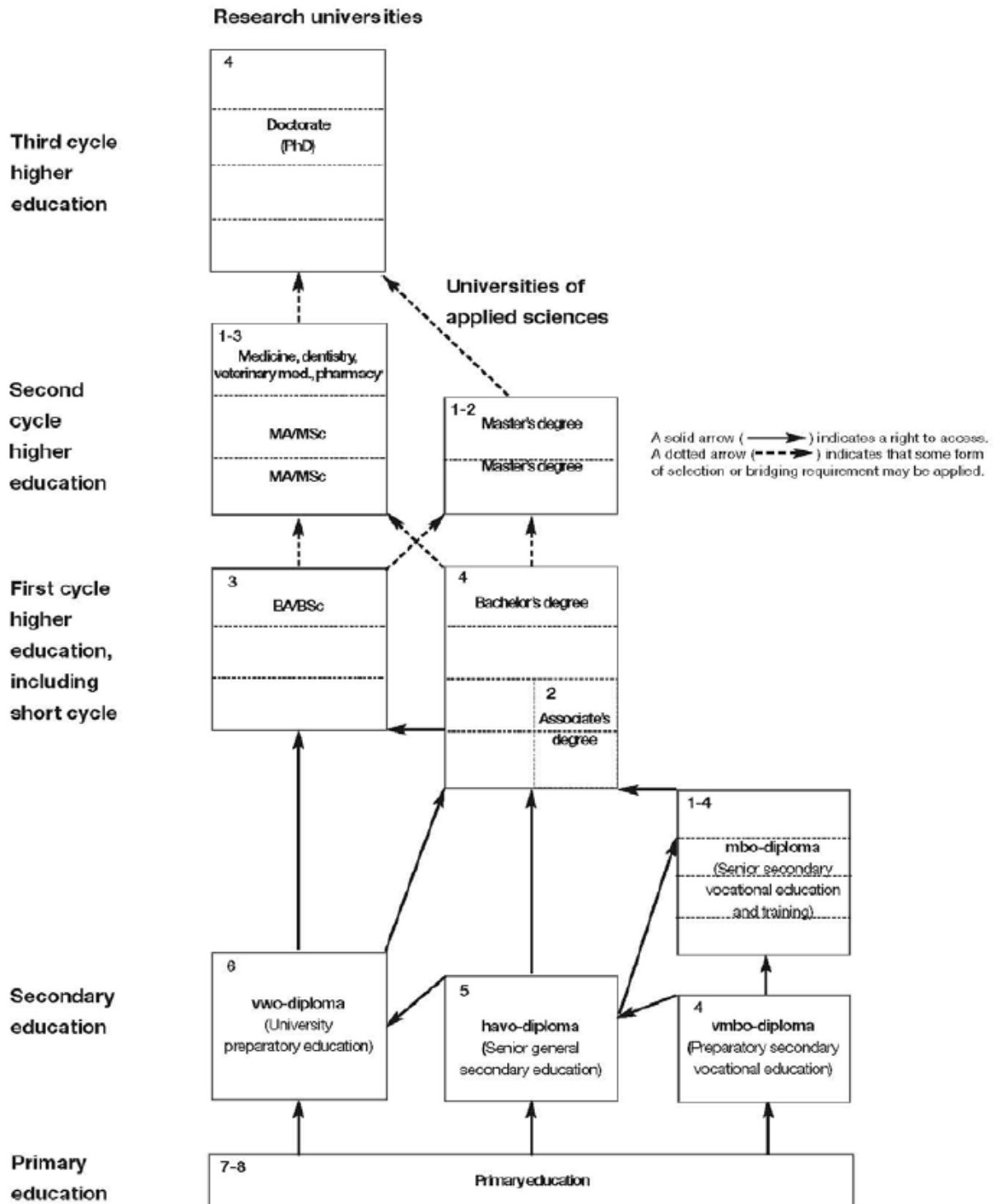


up a document describing the duties and powers of the school management. Each VWO, senior general secondary (HAVO), and pre-vocational (VMBO) school has a plan of action. The competent authority compiles the school plan of action, in conjunction with the school administration, presenting it to the Inspectorate for evaluation. The introduction of broad-based combined schools has made it possible to set up central management boards in schools providing VMBO/HAVO/VWO courses. Schools can now opt either for an ordinary management team (i.e. a head and one or more deputies) or a central management board consisting of up to five people (no more than three full-time equivalents), one of whom is appointed chairperson. Various new forms of management are increasingly being introduced. Rather than there being a head and several deputies, the school management may consist of the head plus a number of portfolio managers. Depending on the size of the school, the management team may also include one or more site heads who, as well as helping to shape policy, are responsible for implementing all aspects of policy at their own site.

Since 1998 all adult and vocational education institutions have been incorporated in **regional training centres** (ROCs). There are two types of ROC, e.g. those in which the institutions involved are completely integrated and have merged to form a single institution with a single competent authority, and those in which only the management has merged. The central management board or executive board, consisting of up to three members, including the chairperson, is responsible on behalf of the management of the ROC, for the preparation and implementation of policy and the daily affairs of the institution. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

Structure and organization of the education system

Netherlands: structure of the education system



Source: NUFFIC, 2011.

Pre-school education

Since 1985 the Primary Education Act no longer provides for separate schools for preschool and primary education. It refers to schools for children 4-12 years old. Formal childcare comprises day nurseries and registered child minding for children under 4, and out-of-school care for children aged 4 to 12. Other forms of childcare, including playgroups, are not considered formal childcare. Normally day nurseries provide childcare for children from six to eight weeks of age until their fourth birthday; playgroups are for children aged 2 to 4. Early childhood education, traditionally available in many playgroups, is also increasingly provided by day nurseries. Playgroups and day nurseries may provide play-oriented preschool programmes for children aged 2 to 4 who are at risk of language disadvantage. In primary schools, early childhood education is provided to 4- to 6-year-olds in years 1 and 2.

Primary education

Primary education caters to children between the ages of 4 and (approximately) 12. In principle, it encompasses eight consecutive years. Even if education is compulsory from the first school day of the month following the month in which a child reaches the age of 5, most children start school at age 4. Years 1 to 4 (4- to 8-year-olds) are known as the junior section and years 5 to 8 (9- to 12-year-olds) as the senior section. Alternatively, the school may be divided into junior, middle and senior sections (years 1–3, 4–6 and 7 and 8, respectively). Upon completion of eight years of primary education pupils receive a school report describing their level of attainment and potential. The CITO test measures pupils' education attainment in year 8 focusing on: reading and writing; mathematics and arithmetic; study skills; and optionally social and environmental studies. The test results are also used to give advice (not binding) to pupils and their parents about the most appropriate type of secondary school. From 2012, the CITO test will be compulsory in all mainstream primary schools, and from 2013 all pupils in year 8 will have to sit a test to assess their numeracy and language skills.

Secondary education

Secondary education is for students aged 12 and over. Decisions on admission to the different types of secondary education are made by the competent authority (e.g. school board). Since 1999/2000, secondary education comprises: (i) four-year pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), intended as a foundation course as regards both the general and the pre-vocational component; (ii) five-year senior general secondary education (HAVO), providing students with a basic general education and preparing them for higher professional education; and (iii) six-year pre-university education (VWO), preparing students for university. Students who have successfully completed the VMBO theoretical programme (see below) may transfer to the fourth year of HAVO and students who have successfully completed HAVO may transfer to the fifth year of VWO. The three types of secondary education begin with a period of 'basic secondary education' (common basis). This usually consists of a broad core curriculum for all students. Although all the three types of secondary education include this common basis, they differ widely from each other in other ways (e.g. the



length of the programme and the level of the school-leaving examinations). Most secondary teaching takes place in combined schools offering a number of different types of secondary education (VMBO, HAVO and VWO). There are three types of VWO school, e.g. the *atheneum*, the gymnasium (where Greek and Latin are compulsory) and the lyceum (a combination of *atheneum* and gymnasium). The upper years of HAVO (years 4 and 5) and VWO (years 4 to 6) are also known as pre-higher education (VHO). At the end of the third year of HAVO and VWO (and in some cases at the end of the fourth year of VWO), students choose one of four subject combinations (culture and society; economics and society; science and health; science and technology) and are regrouped accordingly. Preparatory vocational education (VMBO) is a new type of secondary education introduced in 1999. It consists of 'learning pathways' (theoretical, combined, middle-management vocational, and basic vocational programme) which have replaced the traditional pre-vocational education (VBO) and junior general secondary education (MAVO). At the end of the second year at the earliest students opt for a particular sector and learning pathway. Each sector (engineering and technology, care and welfare, business or agriculture) and each learning pathway has its own curriculum. The main aim of the change was to provide a sounder basis for the next stage of vocational training, i.e. senior secondary vocational education (MBO). The four levels of MBO are: (i) assistant training, lasting six months to one year; (ii) basic vocational training, two- to three-year programmes; (iii) professional or middle-management training, two- to four-year programmes; and (iv) specialized training, lasting three to four years. In most cases completion of a training course at one level is required for admission to the next level. Graduates of Level 4 courses can enter higher professional education (HBO). General secondary education concludes with a national examination in nine subjects (VWO) or eight subjects (HAVO). Successful students are awarded the VWO or HAVO diploma. Students in the final year of pre-vocational education (VMBO) sit national examinations in five subjects (in the case of the two vocational programmes) or in six subjects (combined and theoretical programmes). The VMBO leaving certificate does not qualify as a basic qualification. Students who have successfully completed the theoretical, combined or middle-management vocational programme at VMBO level can enrol in professional and middle-management training (MBO Levels 3 and 4). For each MBO course there are two learning pathways, namely vocational training where practical training takes up between 20% and 60% of the course; and block or day release where practical training takes up more than 60% of the course.

Higher education

Higher education comprises higher professional education (HBO, provided at universities of applied sciences), university education (WO—universities), and higher distance learning (Open university—OU). Admission to a programme at a research-oriented university (WO) requires a VWO diploma or the completion of the first year of higher professional education (HBO), in some cases with additional requirements relating to the subjects taken. Admission to higher professional education (HBO) requires a HAVO or VWO diploma. For this type of education, too, additional requirements relating to the subjects taken apply in some cases. Admission to the HBO is also possible on the basis of a diploma from a management training or specialist training programme in the MBO; in addition to admission to the HBO, this diploma also gives exemption from the first year in some cases, provided it has been obtained in a related field of study. Admission to the shorter associate degree

programme takes place on the basis of the same admission requirements as those for the HBO programme in question. (NUFFIC, 2011). The two-cycle degree structure (bachelor's and master's degrees) in accordance with the Bologna process was officially introduced at the beginning of the academic year 2002/03. The traditional initial degree programmes in the HBO and WO normally involved study loads of 168 credits (the equivalent of a four-year programme). Until 2002, programmes offered in HBO used to lead to the award of one degree, normally requiring four years to complete. Students who were awarded a diploma from a university of applied sciences used the title *baccalaureus*, or, in engineering and agriculture, the title *ingenieur*. After 2002, upon graduation (four-year programme) students receive a bachelor's degree indicating the field of study completed (for example Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Economics). Universities of applied sciences also offer professional master's degree programmes, normally taking one year to complete (two years in some specializations, such as music) and can offer programmes with an academic focus as well. Many of these are available on a part-time basis, enabling students to combine work and study. Since 2006/07, a pilot scheme for two-year associate degree programmes integrated in bachelor's degree programmes has been developed. Until 2002, university research-oriented programmes used to lead to the award of one major degree before the doctorate, known in Dutch as the *doctoraal*. A *doctoraal* programme was not divided into an undergraduate and graduate phase, combining enough depth and breadth to be considered comparable to a master's degree. A *doctoraal* degree confers eligibility for the pursuit of a doctorate through a process known as *promotie*, entailing four years of full-time research following the *doctoraal* under the supervision of a *promotor* (e.g. a full professor at a university). Beginning with the academic year 2002/03, university degree programmes are organized around a bachelor's or undergraduate phase, lasting three years (equivalent to 180 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System–ECTS–credits, one credit being equal to 28 hours of study and 60 credits representing one year of full-time study), and a master's or graduate phase lasting one to one and a half years for most specializations (two years for engineering and scientific specializations; three years in the case of medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacy and dentistry). The third cycle of research-oriented education generally lasts four years and leads to the title of doctor. Although universities primarily offer programmes with an academic emphasis, new legislation permits universities to offer programmes in the applied arts and sciences, at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

As the primary and secondary education levels, the school year comprises at least 200 days between August and June. Schools are open five days a week, but pupils generally have Wednesday afternoons off in primary education. Primary schools have to provide at least 7,520 periods of instruction (hours) over eight years, but the distribution of periods between the first four years and the last four years is flexible. Schools can reduce the total number of periods in the last four years to 3,760, while the minimum number of periods over the first four years is 3,520. (Eurydice, 2008/09 and 2011). With regard to secondary education, the statutory minimum norms are as follows: 1,040 annual hours in the first two years of VMBO, HAVO and VWO and in the third year of HAVO and VWO; 1,000 annual hours in the third year of VMBO, in the fourth year of HAVO, and in the fourth and fifth years of VWO; and 700 hours in the final year of VMBO (year 4), of HAVO (year 5) and of VWO (year 6). (Eurydice, 2008/09). The academic year comprises 42 weeks.

The educational process

The Primary Education Act 1998 and the Expertise Centres Act require schools to teach various subjects. An indication is given per subject of what pupils must learn, in the form of attainment targets. Attainment targets indicate what schools must offer pupils in terms of teaching matter, focusing not only on cognitive and emotional development but also on creativity and social, cultural and physical skills. Schools are free, within the framework set by the government, to decide how much time is spent on the various subjects and areas of the curriculum, and when. The only restriction relates to the minimum number of teaching periods per year, which is laid down by law.

The content of teaching and the teaching methods to be used are not prescribed. Schools are expected to organize the teaching and learning process in such a way that all the subject matter to which the attainment targets (or core objectives, e.g. goals to strive for; see SLO, 2007) relate has been covered by the end of primary school. The targets define in broad terms the core curriculum at primary schools and ensure that pupils are prepared for secondary school. Intermediate targets and teaching guidelines, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, have been developed for arithmetic/mathematics and Dutch to provide additional support for schools in organising teaching in these subjects. Intermediate targets provide a starting point for teaching in each year of primary schooling. Teaching guidelines provide a general framework for designing and organizing learning and development processes in a given subject area or part thereof in the medium to long term. They include the following elements, presented in relation to each other: the goals to be achieved and in what order; appropriate subject matter; the underlying approach to the subject; educational and organizational pointers for achieving these goals. A total of 58 new attainment targets were introduced as of 2005/06 (from August 2006 for years 1 and 2), to be fully implemented by August 2009. These targets give schools more freedom to cater for the differences between pupils, and therefore have not the same level of detail in all areas of learning (for example, the attainment targets for Dutch or arithmetic are more detailed than those for factual or creative subjects). The new attainment targets now also cover citizenship, technology and cultural education. The statutory attainment targets for English provide a model for French and German. Schools have the option of having one or more class teachers train as French/German teachers. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has devised a timeline of Dutch history and culture, known as the *Canon*. Its purpose is to facilitate learning about the past. The Canon fits within existing attainment targets and is intended for the upper classes of primary school and the lower years of secondary school. Tests based on the attainment targets are set for each subject in the core curriculum, excepting physical education. Besides the attainment targets, the only other restriction is the minimum number of teaching periods per year and reference levels. Starting from 2010 schools have to take reference levels as main point for education in Dutch and mathematics. These levels describe what the students should have learned and have practiced when completing primary school. Furthermore, the Benchmarks (Language and Numeracy) Act of August 2010 lays down benchmarks for the knowledge and skills that pupils are expected to have acquired in language and numeracy at different stages in their school career. It provides a general framework for the organization of the curriculum by schools and teachers in primary, secondary, secondary vocational and special education. The



benchmarks were introduced to improve pupils' language and numeracy skills, and ensure continuity of learning. Starting from 2013 all pupils in year 8 will have to sit a test to assess their numeracy and language skills. While the attainment targets describe in general terms the skills and knowledge a child must have acquired by the end of primary school, the benchmark levels for mathematics and language specifically prescribe the degree of proficiency that must be attained in any given year of schooling.

Since August 2006, under the provisions of the revised Primary Education Act, schools must provide teaching in six curriculum areas and are free to determine how many teaching periods to devote to each subject. The attainment targets relate to the following subjects: Dutch; English (taught in the final two years of primary school); arithmetic and mathematics; social and environmental studies, including geography, history, science (including biology), citizenship, social and life skills (including road safety); healthy living; social structures (including political studies) and religious and ideological movements; creative expression (including music, drawing and handicrafts); and sports and movement. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

In the introduction to the 2006 version of the core objectives for primary education three important functions of the core objectives are mentioned, namely: personal development of pupils; transfer of societal and cultural achievements; and equipment for participation in society. Core objectives concern the basic programme schools have to offer. Schools have the freedom to design their own, specific educational programme and to determine in what ways pupils will reach the level of the core objectives. Core objectives may be considered as general indicators of common educational contents. They are descriptions of knowledge, insight and skills that should be offered to all pupils in primary schools and are learning targets for the schools to strive for. Personal development, the development of competences, attention to cultural heritage, good citizenship and the sustainability of society are keywords in Dutch education. Core objectives offer a framework for these intentions. Core objectives have been determined for: Dutch language (oral and written language use; linguistics, including strategies); English language (emphasis on communication skills); Frisian language (oral and written language use; linguistics, including strategies); mathematics/arithmetic (mathematical insight and operation; numbers and calculations; measuring and geometry); personal and world orientation (social studies; nature and technology; space; time); art education (emphasis on personal expression, reflective skills, and knowledge of and appreciation for cultural heritage); and physical education (emphasis on participation in the present-day exercise culture). The 1998 version of the curriculum contained 103 core objectives, reduced to 58 in the 2006 version. Another difference is that cross-curricular objectives have disappeared. In the 1998 version these objectives still had a prominent place and were regarded essential for the realization of good primary education. Cross-curricular objectives included competences that could not be specifically attributed to one learning area, as they had to be realized by primary education as a whole. They also contained pedagogical elements which were not made explicit as such in the different learning areas. The intentions of those cross-curricular objectives reappear, though in a mitigated form, in an introduction to the core objectives, the so-called preamble. In the preamble it is stated that attention should be given to objectives that are important for all learning areas: a good working attitude, use of learning strategies, reflection on one's own actions and learning, expression of one's own thoughts and feelings,



respectful listening to and criticizing of others' opinions, acquisition and processing of information, development of self-confidence, respectful and responsible dealing with each other, and care and appreciation for the living environment. Another difference in the latest version of core objectives is the prominent place of the so-called 'characterization', foregoing all learning areas. Characterization provides a learning area with a profile. For Dutch language, for instance, characterization emphasizes the social importance of mastery of the Dutch language. (SLO, 2007).

In 1992 junior secondary vocational education with its five different categories of school was replaced by pre-vocational education comprising various departments. The period from 1993 onwards saw a number of major reforms of the secondary curriculum. Standards were generally considered to be too low, and differences between pupils due to socioeconomic and cultural factors too great. What is more, students had to make crucial decisions about their careers and studies at far too early a stage. The curriculum for the first few years of secondary education was modernized and harmonized to produce a single basic secondary education curriculum for all students (e.g. pre-vocational secondary education–VMBO; senior general secondary education–HAVO; and pre-university education –VWO) with attainment targets and a common basis. With the introduction of the new curriculum, the emphasis shifted from transferring to applying knowledge and developing skills, while building on the knowledge acquired in the upper years of primary school and preparing pupils for the next stage of the various types of secondary education. Basic secondary education was phased out. The aims of the lower years of secondary school have been set down in 58 general attainment targets. They apply to all students. There are also supplementary targets for modern languages which apply to the majority of students. School policy determines how the attainment targets are fleshed out at every level and for each method of learning. At least two thirds of teaching hours in the lower years (e.g. 1,425 60-minute hours) must be spent on the 58 attainment targets. The school itself translates these targets into subjects, projects, areas of learning, and combinations of all three, or into competence-based teaching, for example. The rest of the curriculum is also subject to statutory requirements, which vary according to type of education.

In August 1998 curriculum reforms were introduced in the upper years or 'second stage' of HAVO and VWO. Students choose one of four subject combinations, which provide an integrated study programme and ensure a smooth transition to higher education. The upper years of HAVO and VWO are together referred to as the period of pre-higher education (VHO). The educational reforms introduced in the upper years of secondary school involve a new approach to teaching with the emphasis on knowledge acquisition and active learning through independent study rather than knowledge transfer. A revised curriculum was introduced on 1 August 2007 for all students entering the fourth year of HAVO and VWO. The first national exams under the new system were held in 2008/09 for HAVO and in 2009/10 for VWO. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

For the first phase of secondary education, a new set of 58 core objectives was introduced in 2006 (replacing the 300 revised core objectives of 1998; the first generation of objectives had been implemented in 1993). The new core objectives were developed thanks to teachers and school principals and concern mainly global core objectives. Schools have the freedom to determine their own innovation levels. Scenarios have been formulated to help them in this area. The Education Council and



the Task Force on Basic Secondary Education designated factors that are pre-conditional for the content of the core objectives, i.e.: cohesion between core objectives, correlation with core objectives of primary education), insight in the development of competences, collaborative learning, and independent learning. Core objectives have been determined for: Dutch language (emphasis on the communicative function of language and strategic skills, as well as on cultural and literary aspects); Frisian language and culture (emphasis on participation in Frisian culture); English language (emphasis on the communicative function of the language; a relationship exists with the European frame of reference); mathematics and arithmetic (emphasis on arithmetic skills); man and nature (emphasis on physical, technological and care-related subjects); man and society (emphasis on the ability to ask questions and do research, to place phenomena in space and time, to use resources); art and culture (emphasis on making and presenting own work, experiencing the work of others, report activities, and reflect); and physical education and sports (emphasis on a wide orientation on different types of physical activities). (SLO, 2007).

The new quality agenda for secondary education was launched in July 2008. Within this context, the government and the education sector set out six policy priorities for the years to come, as well as the actions necessary to achieve them. The six policy priorities are: mathematics and language (to achieve a marked improvement in children's language and numeracy); skills; excellence (to get the best out of students at all levels of education and ensure that all students leave school with an appropriate qualification); citizenship (to provide civic education to all students, including a placement in a non-profit or voluntary organization); teachers' professional freedom; examinations (to ensure the quality and reliability of examinations); and culture of improvement (to turn weak schools into good schools, and make good schools even better). (Eurydice, 2008/09).

Pre-primary education

As mentioned, since 1985 the Primary Education Act no longer provides for separate schools for preschool and primary education. It refers to schools for children 4-12 years old. Formal childcare comprises day nurseries and registered child minding for children under 4, and out-of-school care for children aged 4 to 12. Other forms of childcare, including playgroups, are not considered formal childcare.

Normally day nurseries provide childcare for children from six to eight weeks of age until their fourth birthday; playgroups are for children aged 2 to 4. Early childhood education, traditionally available in many playgroups, is also increasingly provided by day nurseries. Playgroups and day nurseries may provide play-oriented preschool programmes for children aged 2 to 4 who are at risk of language disadvantage. In primary schools, early childhood education is provided to 4- to 6-year-olds in years 1 and 2. Ordinary day nurseries are open Monday to Friday from 8:00 to 18:00. Some day nurseries close for a fixed number of days or weeks per year. The children are divided into groups according to age or in mixed age groups. Although childcare is charged by the hour, parents can usually purchase childcare in five-hour blocks (morning and afternoon). Many day nurseries have a child development policy that prescribes a minimum number of blocks per week. Day nurseries can offer full-day, half-day, extended day and flexible care services.

Childcare facilities and playgroups offer young children the opportunity and the space to play and develop in the company of children of their own age. The aim is to stimulate children's social, cognitive and emotional development. There is no curriculum as such in childcare provision, but there is a trend towards developing pedagogical plans for day nurseries and playgroups. Playgroups that offer pre-school programmes have a more educational focus and include activities that are aimed at preparing children for school. The development stimulation programmes that are used include educationally oriented activities in which children play with concepts related to literacy and numeracy. Language development is an area of special concern. (Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2008).

Around 40% of children under the age of 4 make use of facilities at around 3,500 childcare centres, while some 12% of children aged 4 to 12 make use of out-of-school care at some 3,000 locations. Increasing the availability of childcare and improving its quality are high on the political agenda, based on the idea that an extensive network of high-quality childcare facilities enables parents to combine work and care and boosts children's development. For children under 4 years of age, high-quality childcare means that they are better equipped to start school at the age 4. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

In 1996 the Childcare and Out-of-school Care (Single Parents) Scheme was set up by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to enable single parents to combine work and family responsibilities, with a view to combating hidden poverty and social exclusion. The scheme became permanent in 1997. In 1999 the Childcare and Out-of-school Care (Expansion) Scheme entered into force and was extended to the end of 2003. In 2002, responsibility for childcare policy was transferred from the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

The Childcare Act, entered into force on 1 January 2005, regulates the quality of childcare and the way it is funded. It is based on the principle that childcare is a matter for parents, employers and government. Parents who combine work and care receive childcare benefit, provided the childcare they use complies with the government's quality standards. In section 1 of the Act, childcare is defined as the provision of care and learning opportunities for children commercially or otherwise, but not for free, until the first day of the month in which they start secondary school. The following forms of childcare fall under the Childcare Act: (i) day nurseries offer year-round childcare for children under the age of 4; children attend day nursery for one or more half or full days a week; (ii) out-of-school care for children aged 4 to 12 attending primary school; the school board is required by law to arrange this type of childcare is provided before and after school, as well as in school holidays (excluding public holidays), from 7:30 to 18:30, at parents' request; (iii) childcare for children up to the age of 12 provided by registered child minders either in their own home or in the home of the child; child minders may have up to four children (not including their own) in their charge; (iv) innovative child minders: under certain conditions, a child minder may have up to six children in their charge; (v) communal crèches set up by groups of parents. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

There is no prescribed curriculum as such in childcare provision, but providers are obliged to draw up policy on child development and learning opportunities, in



consultation with parents' committees. From the age of 4, children can go on to primary schools, where attainment targets apply. Dutch is the language of communication in both day nurseries and out-of-school care in childcare centres. In places where Frisian or another regional language is widely spoken, it may be spoken alongside Dutch. Children from a non-Dutch background may likewise be spoken to for part of the time in their own language to aid comprehension. Most childcare establishments employ no specific teaching method. There are, however, some preschool facilities which are based on a particular educational concept, e.g. the Montessori or Reggio Emilia approach. There is no formal assessment of pupils in the childcare sector, though observation of various kinds takes place in early childhood education. A great deal of knowledge and expertise has been built up in recent years regarding the integration of children with disabilities in ordinary childcare facilities. The aim is to end the distinction between facilities for disabled and non-disabled children. (*Ibid.*).

Most Dutch preschools use ready-made curricular programmes, selected by either the local government or the organization itself. Many programmes aim at children both in playgroups as well as in the first two years of primary education, while some specifically target the 2-3 age range. Preschool curricula vary in nature and content and have been developed by a wide variety of individuals and organizations. Some programmes are more comprehensive (*Kaleidoscoop*, *Piramid*), while others focus more on certain areas such as language development or social-emotional development. In addition to centre-based programmes, there has also been a movement toward home-based programmes or programmes for special needs children. Used by 64% of Dutch preschools, the *Piramid* programme is the most popular preschool programme. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2008).

Since 2000 the government has provided funding for early childhood education, a form of education designed to optimize the development opportunities of children aged 2 to 5 from underprivileged backgrounds, who are at risk of educational or language disadvantage. Early childhood education is part of municipal policy on eliminating educational disadvantage. The municipal authorities are also responsible for allocating funding. Additional funding is made available by central government to finance preschool programmes.

Early childhood education is intended for children ages 2.5 up to and including 5 years who carry a risk of language delay in Dutch (so-called target-group children). By attending preschool education, children are given a better start in primary school. Preschool education is given at childcare institutions and preschool playgroups. The municipality exercises control over the policy on educational disadvantages and preschool education. Preschool playgroups fall under the responsibility of municipalities and childcare institutions are operated by market parties with commercial interests. A separate law governs the childcare institutions and it includes quality requirements. Until recently, there was no separate legal regime for the preschool playgroups. Preschool education was primarily provided in preschool playgroups until 2006. Until that year, little preschool education was provided in childcare. In the Development Opportunities through Quality and Education Act (OKE), which took effect on 1 August 2010, the focus is aimed at more and better preschool education in childcare and preschool playgroups. Preschool playgroups and childcare institutions will cooperate more to achieve this. The minimum level of the



quality requirements for preschool playgroups is now more in line with those for childcare. Early-school programmes are given in the first two years of primary school. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

Municipalities establish which children belong to the target group. In 2011, more than 90% of 2.5 to 4 year-olds in the target group of children were reached through an early childhood education programme. During the preschool period, 36% of the 4- and 5-year-olds in the target group of children (years 1 and 2 of primary education, ages 4, 5, and 6) were reached through an early childhood education programme. In the large municipalities, the reach of early childhood education is generally larger than it is in small municipalities. In the four largest Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, or G4), the target-group children reached already receive early childhood education for 4 half-days a week. In the municipalities outside the G4 and G27 (e.g. large cities in the involved in metropolitan policy), they usually receive it for 3 or less half-days. The national average is 3.4 half-days a week. The number of target-group children reached rose steadily in preschool education over five years; the number of target-group preschoolers with preschool education rose slightly. The municipalities have taken large steps forward in recent years in the area of preschool education. Most of the municipalities also meet the requirements for the number of trained professionals. Primary education teachers are trained to a somewhat less degree in early childhood education than are the teachers in preschool playgroups. Preschool teachers at daycare centres and preschool playgroups are often trained at MBO level. Professional higher education graduates are rarely found among preschool teachers. In nearly 73% of municipalities, almost all the preschool playgroups put in extra staff hours for early childhood education (VVE). Some 80% of schools accommodating pupils with a weighting have established “VVE links”, i.e. partnerships with day care centres/preschool playgroups offering the same VVE programme. In general, the quality of the early childhood education provided in larger municipalities is higher than in the smaller municipalities. (*Ibid.*).

In 2001, the total number of children in childcare places was 280,018. The total number of childcare facilities was 4,230 (including 1,647 facilities for 4-12-year-olds). (Dutch Eurydice Unit, 2005). In 2008 the capacity of childcare facilities (day nurseries and out-of-school care, not including child minders) amounted to about 308,500 places, of which some 149,300 places in day nurseries. There were 1,687 organizations active in this sector and the number of employees was about 73,500, of whom 96% were women. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

Primary education

As mentioned, primary education caters to children between the ages of 4 and (approximately) 12. In principle, it encompasses eight consecutive years. Even if education is compulsory from the first school day of the month following the month in which a child reaches the age of 5, most children start school at age 4. Years 1 to 4 (4- to 8-year-olds) are known as the junior section and years 5 to 8 (9- to 12-year-olds) as the senior section. Alternatively, the school may be divided into junior, middle and senior sections (years 1–3, 4–6 and 7 and 8, respectively). Primary education is free of charge. Schools may ask for a voluntary parental contribution,



mainly intended to cover the costs of extra activities (celebrations, cultural activities, school trips).

Upon completion of eight years of primary education pupils receive a school report describing their level of attainment and potential. The CITO test measures pupils' education attainment in year 8 focusing on: reading and writing; mathematics and arithmetic; study skills; and optionally social and environmental studies. The test results are also used to give advice (not binding) to pupils and their parents about the most appropriate type of secondary school. From 2012, the CITO test will be compulsory in all mainstream primary schools, and from 2013 all pupils in year 8 will have to sit a test to assess their numeracy and language skills.

As specified in the Primary Education Act, primary education aims to promote the development of children's emotions, intellect and creativity and the acquisition of essential knowledge together with social, cultural and physical skills in an uninterrupted process of development. Teaching must reflect the fact that pupils are growing up in a multicultural society. Recently the Act was amended and an additional specification was included stating that primary education should stimulate active citizenship en social integration. (Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2008).

The Primary Education Act and the Expertise Centres Act assign schools a number of tasks. One of these is to teach different subjects. Attainment targets indicate what schools must offer pupils in terms of teaching matter. Schools must pay attention to the cognitive, creative, social, emotional and physical development of children. Moreover they must not only instil knowledge in pupils, but also skills and insights, such as behaviour that shows respect for generally accepted norms and values, as well as knowledge of and respect for religious and other beliefs that play an important role in Dutch society. In the case of children who need extra help, the aim is to provide individual attention that is tailored to the needs of the child. These children are not automatically placed in special schools. Mainstream primary schools and special schools for primary education work together, so that as many children as possible can attend mainstream schools. The government works together with schools to actively promote this policy, which is known as 'Going to School Together'. Special education schools are only intended for children who really cannot cope at a mainstream school, despite extra help. In November 2007 the government presented its new quality-centred agenda for primary education (*Schools for tomorrow*) to Parliament. It provides the education sector and the authorities with an overview of the government's policy objectives for the period 2007-2011. The agenda gives priority to improving children's language and numeracy skills, since competence in this area is essential to their success in other subjects at school, in their further school career and in society at large. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

Primary schools are run by the local authorities (public-authority schools) or are privately run. As of 1 August 2006 mainstream primary schools and special education schools receive a block grant to cover their staffing costs in addition to the block grant already allocated for running costs. As a result, school boards now receive a single sum of money, which they are free to spend at their own discretion, giving them more scope to manage the school.



Mainstream primary schools and special education schools are free to decide on their own internal organization. At most primary schools the pupils are grouped by age. At some schools, children of different ages are placed in the same class. Others have a flexible arrangement and children are grouped according to their level of development or ability. The Ministry does not set any requirements regarding minimum or maximum numbers of pupils to a class. Primary school teachers and teachers at special education schools are qualified to teach all subjects (except sensory coordination and physical exercise) across the entire age range. Schools may also have additional specialist teachers to teach specific subjects such as physical education (and sensory coordination), religious education, art, music, handicrafts or Frisian. In 1997, the post of teaching assistant was introduced to provide help in the classroom for teachers in years 1 to 4. Teaching assistants help the teacher with routine teaching activities and supervise pupils in the acquisition of practical skills. The ratio of teaching assistants and specialist teachers to class teachers is decided by the school.

Schools are free, within the framework set by central government, to decide how much time is spent on the various subjects and areas of the curriculum. They have also been given more flexibility regarding the length of the school day so that timetables can reflect the specific needs and wishes of the school and the community. They still have to provide at least 7,520 teaching periods over the eight years that children attend school, but the distribution of periods between the first four years and the last four years is flexible. Schools can reduce the total number of teaching periods in the last four years to 3,760. The minimum number of periods over the first four years remains unchanged at 3,520. The maximum of 5.5 hours of teaching a day has been abolished. 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. The parent members of participation councils have a right of assent regarding the setting and changing of school timetables. Schools are also allowed to timetable in a maximum of seven 4-day weeks a year for years 3 to 8 (not counting weeks in which the school is closed for a day anyway, due to a public holiday). The school prospectus must inform parents when these are before the start of the school year. The Education Inspectorate oversees school timetables and sees to it that schools keep to the times stated in their prospectus. Every school must also have a school plan, updated every four years, describing the steps being taken to monitor and improve quality and indicating the school's policy on educational matters, staffing and internal quality assurance. Through this document, the school accounts to the Inspectorate and the participation council for its policies. (*Ibid.*).

As mentioned, attainment targets (or core objectives) indicate what schools must offer pupils in terms of teaching matter, focusing not only on cognitive and emotional development but also on creativity and social, cultural and physical skills. Schools are free, within the framework set by the government, to decide how much time is spent on the various subjects and areas of the curriculum. Since August 2006, schools must provide teaching in six curriculum areas and are free to determine how many teaching periods to devote to each subject. The attainment targets relate to the following subjects: Dutch; English (taught in the final two years of primary school); arithmetic and mathematics; social and environmental studies, including geography, history, science (including biology), citizenship, social and life skills (including road safety); healthy living; social structures (including political studies) and religious and

ideological movements; creative expression (including music, drawing and handicrafts); and sports and movement. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

Under the terms of the Primary Education Act, the following subject areas must appear in the curriculum, where possible in an integrated form: (i) sensory coordination and physical education; (ii) Dutch; (iii) arithmetic and mathematics; (iv) English; (v) a number of factual subjects, including geography, history, science (including biology), (vi) social structures (including political studies) and religious and ideological movements; (vii) expressive activities, including use of language, drawing, music, handicrafts, and play and movement; (viii) social and life skills, including road safety, and (ix) healthy living. Although these subject areas are compulsory, schools are free to decide how much time they devote to each domain. The core objectives describe the desired results of a learning process, not the way in which these are to be achieved. Schools themselves choose their own pedagogical approach and select or develop their teaching and learning materials. (Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2008).

The table below shows a typical weekly lesson timetable at the beginning of the 2000s:

Netherlands. Primary education: typical weekly lesson timetable

Subject	Number of weekly hours in each grade							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Dutch language	3h30	3h30	8h45	8h30	8h30	7h45	7h15	7h15
English	–	–	–	–	–	–	0h45	0h45
Arithmetic/mathematics	0h30	0h30	4h15	4h30	5h	5h	5h	5h
Human and environmental studies								
– general	1h	1h	1h15	1h15	0h30	0h45	0h30	0h30
– geography	–	–	–	–	1h	1h15	1h30	1h30
– history	–	–	–	–	1h	1h15	1h30	1h30
– science	–	–	–	–	1h	1h15	1h15	1h15
– road safety	0h15	0h15	0h30	0h30	0h45	0h45	0h45	0h45
Physical education	8h	8h	1h30	1h30	1h30	1h30	1h15	1h15
Art studies	6h	6h	4h	4h	3h30	3h15	3h	3h
Other	2h	2h	1h	1h	1h	1h	1h	1h
Breaks	1h15	1h15	1h15	1h15	1h15	1h15	1h15	1h15
Total weekly hours	22h30	22h30	22h30	22h30	25h	25h	25h	25h

Source: van Die, 2001. In principle, the area “human and environmental studies” comprises: geography; history; society; technology; environment; healthy living and self-reliance; and science. The following subjects are classified under “art studies”: drawing and handicrafts; music; play/promotion of language usage; movement.

Schools in the province of Friesland must also teach Frisian, unless they have dispensation from the provincial executive. Children from a non-Dutch background may under certain circumstances have lessons in their own language. The languages taught depend on local demand and the facilities available. Languages other than



Dutch may be used in the classroom in years 1 to 4 to help children in Dutch, arithmetic or other subjects. Nearly all schools use information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching or innovative purposes, and over half have laid down and implemented ICT policy plans. Over the period 2005-2009 the number of schools making intensive use of computers has doubled. Most have an Internet connection. Many schools have a computer room, where groups of children can work at terminals. There is an average of one computer for every six pupils in primary and secondary schools. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

Most schools report on pupils' progress per subject or subject area (usually three times a year). Parents are invited to the school on parents' evenings, when they can look at their child's exercise and notebooks, and discuss their progress, homework, tests, projects and out-of-school activities. Some schools express pupils' progress by means of marks, while others provide a written assessment. There are no statutory rules about when pupils may move up to the next year and when they may not. Individual schools lay down procedures for this in their own school plans. A pupil may occasionally have to repeat a year, but the aim of ensuring an uninterrupted process of development means that this is avoided wherever possible. Many schools use intermediate targets and tests to measure pupils' progress. Such tests are often part of the teaching material, or are general tests. When a pupil leaves the school, the head teacher, together with the teaching staff, draws up a report providing information about the pupil for his or her new school, often on the basis of a school leavers' attainment test. A copy of the report is given to the child's parents. Primary schools use tests devised by various bodies engaged in educational measurement. The largest of body, the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO), develops attainment tests for pupils in year 8 which schools can use to measure their end results and compare them with those of other schools. Nearly 85% of primary schools use the CITO test. A total of 153,000 pupils from about 6,200 schools sat the test in February 2009. It comprises 200 multiple-choice questions covering the basic skills in reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, as well as study skills. There is also an optional section on environmental studies consisting of 90 questions, which was tackled by 85% of pupils sitting the CITO test in 2009. CITO also develops tests for measuring the progress of individual pupils (pupil monitoring system) so that teaching can be further tailored to individual needs. (*Ibid.*).

In 2006, the number of pupils in primary education was 1,658,800 (including 46,300 pupils in special education). There were 6,929 mainstream primary schools and 320 special education schools (the schools for children with learning and behavioural difficulties and the schools for children with moderate learning difficulties have been converted into special primary schools). The number of staff (in full-time equivalents) in mainstream primary schools was 105,900, including 9,700 heads and deputy heads, 85,800 teachers and 10,300 support staff. The number of staff (in full-time equivalents) in special primary education was 7,900, including 500 heads and deputy heads, 5,400 teachers and 2,000 support staff. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2007).

In 2011, a total of 1,629,600 pupils were enrolled in primary education, including some 34,400 pupils enrolled in special education primary schools and some 35,900 pupils enrolled in secondary special education. In primary education, pupils with a potential educational disadvantage are given a weighting, depending on their



parents' level of education. These weightings are taken into account in the funding schools receive. Two weightings are used: 0.3 for pupils whose parents have no more than LBO (lower vocational training)/VBO (pre-vocational education) qualifications and 1.2 for pupils who have one parent with only a primary education and one parent with no more than LBO/VBO qualifications. In 2011, the number of 0.3 pupils totalled approximately 104,500, and the number of 1.2 pupils approximately 82,500. The new weighting system was introduced in steps, starting in 2006. The old weighting system was abolished in 2009. Between 2007 and 2011, the number of mainstream primary schools fell from 6,898 to 6,807. During that same period, the number of special primary schools fell by 4%, from 316 to 304. The number of special (secondary) schools remained fairly constant at 324. Some 31% of the pupils were enrolled in public schools, 24% in Protestant schools, 34% in Roman Catholic schools, and 11% in other private schools. In 2011, the number of school boards totalled 1,190, which is a decrease of 151 boards or 11% compared to 2007. The proportion of boards governing twenty or more schools has increased by some 30% compared to 2007 (e.g. 19 school boards). In 2011 the number of staff (in full-time equivalents) in primary education was 127,000, corresponding to some 175,000 employees (including heads, deputy heads and other staff such as ancillary, organizational and administrative staff). Mainstream primary education accounted for more than 100,000 full-time jobs, special primary education for 6,600 and (secondary) special education for 20,000. The percentage of female teachers was estimated at around 82%. Although primary education employs a large proportion of women, they are still under-represented in management. Still, the proportion of women in management positions has risen sharply in recent years. The proportion of female school heads rose from 28% in 2007 to 40% in 2011. Women accounted for well over half of deputy school heads (59%) in 2011, compared to 52% in 2007. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

Secondary education

As mentioned, secondary education is for students aged 12 and over. Decisions on admission to the different types of secondary education are made by the competent authority (e.g. school board). Secondary education is free of charge apart from certain educational expenses, i.e. costs connected with schools and education which are not prescribed by law or paid for by the government. The parental contribution is voluntary. Since 1999/2000, secondary education comprises: (i) four-year pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), intended as a foundation course as regards both the general and the pre-vocational component; (ii) five-year senior general secondary education (HAVO), providing students with a basic general education and preparing them for higher professional education; and (iii) six-year pre-university education (VWO), preparing students for university. Students who have successfully completed the VMBO theoretical programme (see below) may transfer to the fourth year of HAVO and students who have successfully completed HAVO may transfer to the fifth year of VWO.

The three types of secondary education begin with a period of 'basic secondary education' (common basis). This usually consists of a broad core curriculum for all students. Although all the three types of secondary education include this common basis, they differ widely from each other in other ways (e.g. the length of the programme and the level of the school-leaving examinations). Most



secondary teaching takes place in combined schools offering a number of different types of secondary education (VMBO, HAVO and VWO). There are three types of VWO school, e.g. the *atheneum*, the gymnasium (where Greek and Latin are compulsory) and the lyceum (a combination of *atheneum* and gymnasium). The upper years of HAVO (years 4 and 5) and VWO (years 4 to 6) are also known as pre-higher education (VHO). At the end of the third year of HAVO and VWO (and in some cases at the end of the fourth year of VWO), students choose one of four subject combinations (culture and society; economics and society; science and health; science and technology) and are regrouped accordingly. Each group of subjects includes: a common component, which occupies 35% to 43% of the curriculum; a specialized component (consisting of subjects relating to the chosen subject combination), occupying 39% to 48% of the curriculum; and an optional component occupying 18% to 20% of the curriculum (students 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 specialized component).

Preparatory vocational education (VMBO) is a new type of secondary education introduced in 1999. It consists of 'learning pathways' (theoretical, combined, middle-management vocational, and basic vocational programme) which have replaced the traditional pre-vocational education (VBO) and junior general secondary education (MAVO). At the end of the second year at the earliest students opt for a particular sector and learning pathway. Each sector (engineering and technology, care and welfare, business or agriculture) and each learning pathway has its own curriculum. The main aim of the change was to provide a sounder basis for the next stage of vocational training, i.e. senior secondary vocational education (MBO). The four levels of MBO are: (i) assistant training, lasting six months to one year; (ii) basic vocational training, two- to three-year programmes; (iii) professional or middle-management training, two- to four-year programmes; and (iv) specialized training, lasting three to four years. In most cases completion of a training course at one level is required for admission to the next level. Graduates of Level 4 courses can enter higher professional education (HBO). General secondary education concludes with a national examination in nine subjects (VWO) or eight subjects (HAVO). Successful students are awarded the VWO or HAVO diploma. Students in the final year of pre-vocational education (VMBO) sit national examinations in five subjects (in the case of the two vocational programmes) or in six subjects (combined and theoretical programmes). The VMBO leaving certificate does not qualify as a basic qualification. Students who have successfully completed the theoretical, combined or middle-management vocational programme at VMBO level can enrol in professional and middle-management training (MBO Levels 3 and 4). For each MBO course there are two learning pathways, namely vocational training where practical training takes up between 20% and 60% of the course; and block or day release where practical training takes up more than 60% of the course.

Secondary education distinguishes between the lower years (the first two years of VMBO and the first three years of HAVO and VWO) and the upper years. In the lower years, the emphasis is on acquiring and applying knowledge and skills, and delivering an integrated curriculum. Teaching is based on attainment targets (or core objectives) which specify the knowledge and skills pupils must acquire. The upper years of secondary school encompass years 3 and 4 of VMBO, years 4 and 5 of HAVO and years 4-6 of VWO). In HAVO and VWO, the emphasis is on enabling



students to work increasingly on their own, under the teacher's supervision. The amount of work that students are expected to do is expressed in terms of study load. This is the time required by an average student to master a particular quantity of material. This includes preparation and self-study at home as well as attending lessons. The following general aim has been formulated for secondary education: to contribute to students' development, with attention and respect for the various religious, philosophical and social values that exist in Dutch society, and with an emphasis on the knowledge and skills needed to function well in society, as an individual, a citizen and a worker. The aims of the lower years of secondary school have been set down in 58 general attainment targets/core objectives. They apply to all students. There are also a number of supplementary targets for modern languages which apply to the majority of students. School policy determines how the attainment targets are fleshed out at every level and for each method of learning. The aims of the upper years of HAVO and VWO are to provide a broad general education and to ensure cohesion between the various subjects and harmonization with the methods used in higher education. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

As a result of the government's mergers policy in the 1990s, the number of secondary schools fell from 1,454 in 1992 to 652 in 2006 and 647 in 2008. Now incentives for mergers have been scrapped and current policy aims to promote small-scale schools and halt the creation of ever larger establishments. Schools offering the VMBO theoretical programme only, together with HAVO and VWO, are known as combined schools for general secondary education (AVO). There are also schools which provide only one type of secondary education, for instance VMBO or VWO, and VBO schools that provide only the basic and middle-management vocational programmes. VMBO schools and schools providing practical training are required to form part of a consortium. (*Ibid.*).

Most schools employ the year group system with students of the same age being placed together in the same class. Schools are free to group students by type of education or place students following different types of education in the same class. Combined schools often group their students in combined classes in the first year. More than half of all first-year students are in mixed VMBO/HAVO or HAVO/VWO classes.

As mentioned, the statutory minimum norms concerning the number of instructional hours are as follows: 1,040 annual hours in the first two years of VMBO, HAVO and VWO and in the third year of HAVO and VWO; 1,000 annual hours in the third year of VMBO, in the fourth year of HAVO, and in the fourth and fifth years of VWO; and 700 hours in the final year of VMBO (year 4), of HAVO (year 5) and of VWO (year 6). Schools decide for themselves how these hours should be spread over the school year. There is no prescribed or advisory timetable and no prescribed minimum for the number of teaching hours in each subject. Physical education is, however, an exception. The subject must be taught in every year, and there are norms as to how the lessons must be spread over the school year. In the upper years of HAVO and VWO the length of lessons and the length of the school day are also determined on the basis of study load. This covers every element of the curriculum, including writing up projects, reading, using a resource centre, excursions and homework. The teaching hours' requirements have been relaxed in 2007/08. Out of the statutory 1,040 teaching hours, schools may elect to devote up to 40 hours to



extracurricular activities (including customized activities such as mentoring classes and arts classes for talented students). These activities, which are no longer compulsory, are open to all students. Placements in non-profit or voluntary organizations also count as teaching hours (up to a maximum of 72 hours). (Eurydice, 2008/09).

As in the case of primary education, every school must have a school plan, updated every four years, describing the steps being taken to monitor and improve quality and indicating the school's policy on educational matters, staffing and internal quality assurance. A school plan may cover one or more secondary schools and one or more other schools which share the same competent authority (school board). It must be approved by the participation council. The school prospectus, which must be updated every year, contains information for parents and students about the school's objectives, how it intends to achieve them and the results already achieved. It also gives details about the voluntary parental contribution and the rights and obligations of parents and students. The prospectus has to be approved by the parents, staff and students before publication.

With regard to VMBO, each sector (engineering and technology, care and welfare, business or agriculture) and each learning pathway has its own curriculum. Each subject combination comprises a common component, an optional component, and a sector-specific component. The common component is compulsory for all pupils and comprises Dutch, English, social studies I, physical education and arts I. The subjects in the sector-specific component of the theoretical programme are: mathematics and physics & chemistry I (engineering and technology); biology and one of mathematics, geography, history or social studies II (care and welfare); economics and one of mathematics, French or German (business); mathematics and either biology or physics & chemistry I (agriculture). Depending on their learning pathway, students follow either one or two additional optional subjects: one major vocationally-oriented subject in the basic vocational and middle-management vocational programmes; one minor vocationally-oriented subject and one general subject in the combined programme; two general subjects in the theoretical programme. Schools providing basic vocational programmes may offer programmes combining work and study. Work-study programmes are learning pathways within the basic vocational programmes that include an out-of-school practical component comprising between 640 full hours (80 days) and 1,280 hours (160 days), incorporated into the third and fourth year of the course. These programmes are specifically aimed at obtaining a basic qualification at basic vocational level. Students must at the least take classes in Dutch and the appropriate vocational subject. They must also sit examinations in these subjects. Examinations may also be taken in other subjects, but are not compulsory. Students are awarded a special diploma enabling them to proceed to related courses at MBO Level 2. Different requirements apply for students in the lower years who will be going on to work-study programmes. Practical training includes at least Dutch language, arithmetic and mathematics, IT studies and physical education plus subjects that prepare students for jobs on the regional labour market. These subjects are chosen by the competent authority (school board) in consultation with the municipal authorities and, through them, local employers. (*Ibid.*).



The total standard study load for the 4th and 5th years (combined) of HAVO in the revised curriculum is divided into three components. The study load for the common component is 1,120 hours. The specialized component is made up of both compulsory and optional subjects which together have a study load of: 1,400 to 1,480 hours for science and technology; 1,360 to 1,480 hours for science and health; 1,360 to 1,480 hours for economics and society; and 1,360 to 1,520 hours for culture and society. The study load for the general optional component is 600 hours for science and technology and 640 hours for the other subject combinations. Finally, students also have to write a project that has a study load of 80 hours, bringing the total study load to 3,200 hours. In the revised curriculum for the upper years, the specialized component comprises both compulsory and optional specialized subjects. Students choose their optional subjects from a range of subjects offered by the school. There are three compulsory specialized subjects and one optional specialized subject in each of the subject combinations 'science and technology', 'science and health' and 'economics and society'. There are two compulsory specialized subjects, one optional specialized cultural subject and one optional specialized social subject in the subject combination 'culture and society'. Schools are not required to provide a full range of optional specialized subjects and may even choose to make certain subjects compulsory and not offer any optional subjects. The general optional component consists of two parts: official exam subjects and a 'free' component of the school's own choosing. The school is responsible for the content and study load of the 'free' component.

The total standard study load for the 4th, 5th and 6th years (combined) of VWO in the revised curriculum is also divided into three components. The study load for the common component is 1,920 hours. The specialized component is made up of both compulsory and optional subjects which together have a study load of: 1,960 to 2,000 hours for science and technology; 1,880 to 2,000 hours for science and health; 1,880 to 2,000 hours for economics and society; 1,880 to 2,160 hours for culture and society. The study load for the general optional component is 840 hours for science and technology and 920 hours for the other subject combinations. Finally, students also have to write a project that has a study load of 80 hours, bringing the total study load to 4,800 hours. Classical culture is part of the core curriculum at 'gymnasium' and replaces the half-subject culture and the arts I. 'Gymnasium' students may, however, take culture and the arts 1 as part of the general optional component. All 'gymnasium' students also take Latin language and literature and/or Greek language and literature, both of which have a study load of 600 hours in the revised curriculum. (*Ibid.*).

Tests based on the attainment targets are set for each subject in the core curriculum (with the exception of physical education). Interim assessment may also take place where subjects are not taught throughout the lower years. The final tests may not, however, be sat before the end of the second year of the course. Schools may supplement these tests with their own test papers and can decide when and in what order the tests are to be taken. At the end of the second year, the school board advises students as to which option they should choose. Students unable to achieve all the attainment targets may qualify for exemption from the attainment targets or from one or more subjects in the core curriculum. Decisions of this kind are taken by a committee appointed by the school board. At most schools, parents receive three to four progress reports per year. Some schools also give six-weekly interim reports on



students' progress. The school plan outlines the school's policy on educational and other matters, including the rules for promoting students to the next year.

The leaving examination is in two parts: a school examination and a national examination. The elements to be tested in each are specified in the examination syllabus, which is approved by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. The syllabus also specifies the number of tests which make up the national examination, and their length. Schools are responsible for setting the school exam. Every year, schools are required to submit their own school exam syllabus to the Inspectorate showing what elements of the syllabus are tested when, and how marks are calculated, including the weight allocated to tests, and opportunities to resit them. Generally speaking, the school exam consists of two or more tests per subject. These may be oral, practical or written. There are also practical assignments for which no marks are given, only an acknowledgement that the candidate has completed them properly. The school exam must be completed and the results submitted to the Inspectorate before the national examination starts. The national examination consists of tests with open or multiple-choice questions and in some cases a practical component too. For some subjects there is only a school exam. The national examination can be sat at three times during the school year—in May, June and August. All candidates sit the examination in May. The June and August sessions are for students doing resits, or who were unable to sit the examination in May. The head teacher is responsible for determining each candidate's final marks. The final mark in each subject is the average of the mark for the school exam and the mark for the national examination. To obtain a leaving certificate, a candidate must have scored pass marks in a specified number of subjects. For subjects with only a school exam, the mark obtained is the final mark (rounded off). Marks are awarded on a scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent). A six is a pass. In the future, students taking the national examination will have to demonstrate a basic level of computer competence. To this end, schools may set a digital exam instead of a paper exam in one subject in each subject combination for HAVO and VWO students, or one subject in each sector of the VMBO combined programme.

The VMBO leaving examination is in two parts: a school examination and a national examination. For some subjects, i.e. physical education, social studies and arts I, there is a school examination only. The national examination consists of written exams and combined written and practical exams. All students take a written exam in general subjects like Dutch, mathematics and biology. Students in the basic vocational, middle-management vocational and combined learning pathways also take a national written and practical examination (CSPE) for vocationally-oriented subjects like building techniques and caring occupations. The CSPE consists of a practical assignment and related theoretical questions. (*Ibid.*).

In 2006, the number of students in secondary education was 909,500, of whom 112,100 receiving a special needs education provision. The number of staff (in full-time equivalents) was 84,400, including 62,600 teachers, 3,900 managers and 18,000 support staff. In 2005, a total of 165,000 students earned a diploma in secondary education. In the same year, a total of 22,000 students left secondary education without any qualifications, which represented 11% of the total number of school-leavers. Nearly two-thirds of drop-outs came from lower secondary education. In 2005, 4.9% of the students had to repeat a year. In 2006, the number of participants in



MBO funded by the Ministry of Education was estimated at 465,900 (based on the preliminary surveys for 2006). The number of participants in MBO funded by the Ministry of Agriculture was estimated at 25,800. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2007).

In 2011 the number of students enrolled in secondary schools amounted to about 918,000. More than 41% of students with special educational needs were enrolled in the first two years of secondary education. In 2011/12, the secondary education sector had a total of 646 schools. Forty-four per cent of them were broad-based combined schools, offering VMBO, HAVO, VWO and—in 8% of schools—elementary vocational training. The broad-based combined schools accommodated 70% of the students. The number of staff (in full-time equivalents) was 87,600, corresponding to nearly 107,000 employees (including managers and other staff). The share of female teachers remained stable at 45%. The proportion of women in management positions rose from 26% in 2010 to 28% in 2011. In 2011, 43% of HAVO boys and 34% of HAVO girls chose one of the exact science clusters. Within VWO, these proportions were 66% for boys and 55% for girls. The number of VWO girls opting for science and health is considerably larger than the number of boys. In addition, the proportion of girls enrolled in science and technology or both science clusters is picking up. Within HAVO, the differences are larger than within VWO. HAVO girls still seldom opt for science and technology, while the percentage of girls opting for science and health is only marginally larger than that of boys. The small proportion of boys opting for the culture and society cluster remains on a par with 2010, within both HAVO and VWO. In 2011, enrolment in MBO was estimated at 485,000 students (based on the preliminary surveys for 2011). The largest of the three educational routes is full-time vocational training, with 330,000 students (68% of total enrolment). (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

Assessing learning achievement nationwide

According to the report published in 2007 by the Education Inspectorate, the quality of primary education is adequate and in some respects even good. The level of the results at the end of primary school is at least satisfactory in 93% of the schools. The quality of secondary education is, on the whole, satisfactory. The implementation of special needs provision and counselling could be more systematic. The large number of early school-leavers (drop-outs) is a cause for concern. Particularly in pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO, basic vocational and middle management vocational programmes) within the four large cities, the quality of education compares poorly with education elsewhere in the country. In 2000, the percentage of early school-leavers was 15.5%, while in 2006 12.9% of 18- to 24-year-olds had no basic qualification and were no longer enrolled in school.

Primary schools with sufficient final results for language and arithmetic have more often scheduled sufficient teaching time for these basic skills than have schools whose results are below standard. Also, the coordination of the amount of time given to language and reading with the educational needs of pupils appears to correspond clearly with the higher final results for language, reading and arithmetic. In 97% of primary schools teachers make efficient use of the planned learning time. In 87% of primary schools, the learning and teaching time for language and arithmetic is sufficiently adapted to the educational needs of the pupils. During May and June



2006, the Inspectorate conducted an unannounced study into the teaching time in secondary education and senior secondary vocational education. At virtually all the secondary schools it was found that the actual teaching time did not meet the legal requirements (i.e. intended teaching time). At the end of the school year, especially, considerable teaching time is lost. Approximately half of the secondary schools have eight or more days without any activities for students. A follow-up study showed that 14 of the 25 secondary schools surveyed did not have their timetable in order and that four of the 25 schools could not demonstrate whether or not they actually implemented the legally required 1,040 teaching hours.

From an international perspective, Dutch pupils in the past achieved good results in arithmetic. There are indications that this area needs some attention. The Periodic Assessment of Educational Achievement provides insight into the arithmetic proficiency of pupils at the end of primary education. A positive point is the fact that pupils have gained greater insight into the structure of numbers and the relationships between numbers and that progress has been achieved in working with pocket calculators. But abilities in the basic processes (adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing) seem to have declined. There are clear signs that many pupils have insufficient numerical skills in secondary education.

In 2003, 11.5% of pupils had low-level reading skills, understood as level 1 in the scale of abilities of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey. A study conducted in 2004 showed that approximately 24% of students in basic vocational programmes were not able to independently read textbooks that were written for their age group. The same is true for 17% of students in more theoretically oriented vocational programmes and for 18% of students in general secondary education (HAVO and VWO). This shows that the 'maintenance' of basic skills continues to be important in secondary education. A study conducted by the Inspectorate itself and academic research into the subject 'Dutch' in senior secondary vocational education (MBO) revealed that 60 to 70% of the surveyed teachers thought that the language ability of the participants was insufficient to complete the study programme successfully. (Inspectorate of Education, 2007).

The report published in 2012 by the Education Inspectorate indicates that the education provided in the Netherlands scores well in comparison with other countries. Most pupils and students receive education of sufficient or good quality. A number of positive developments that the Inspectorate pointed out in earlier reports have continued into the 2010/11 school year, namely: there are fewer weak and unsatisfactory schools and study programmes; more pupils and students continue on to higher forms of education; educational achievement in primary education increased slightly once again and there were fewer early school leavers in secondary vocational education. Nevertheless, there are major differences between the schools, so that not all pupils and students are getting the same opportunities. The following aspects of the education system can be improved: the quality of teaching (to be able to provide teaching tailored to the needs of both low and high performing pupils and students); the support provided to vulnerable pupils and students; boardroom attention for the quality of educational practices and for compliance with legislation and regulations; and the performance of a number of small schools and study programmes. (Inspectorate of Education, 2012).



The results of the last PISA study, published in December 2010, show that Dutch 15-year-olds perform above average in international terms with regard to reading, mathematics and natural sciences. With an average reading skills score of 508 points in 2009, the Netherlands ranks second in the European rankings. The Netherlands ranks seventh among the 35 countries in the OECD rankings and tenth among the 65 countries participating in PISA 2009. The average score shows a slight (non-significant) increase compared to 2006 and a slight decrease compared to 2003. At 526 points, the average Dutch mathematics score places the Netherlands second in the European rankings, behind Finland. The Netherlands ranks sixth in the OECD rankings and eleventh among the 65 countries participating in PISA. The average Dutch score shows a (significant) decrease from 2006 and 2003. An average score of 522 in the PISA natural sciences test places the Netherlands third in the European rankings, behind Finland and Estonia. The Netherlands ranks eighth in the OECD rankings and eleventh among the 65 countries participating in PISA. The average Dutch score shows a (non-significant) decrease from 2006 and 2003. The percentage of functionally illiterate 15-year-olds in the Netherlands was 14.4% in 2009 (lower than the OECD average of 18.8%). The slight decrease in this percentage since 2006 is a positive development. Functionally illiterate pupils in the Netherlands are primarily found in elementary vocational training and in the basic vocational programmes. The proportion of 15-year-olds with low skills in science has changed little since 2006. The Dutch percentage (13.2%) is well below the OECD average of 18%. Since 2003, the proportion of weak performers in mathematics has increased from 11.5 to 13.4%. This increase has prompted an increased policy attention for education in mathematics. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

In 2009, top performers in reading represented 9.8% of Dutch 15-year-olds, which is higher than the OECD average (7.6%). The slight increase in this percentage in comparison with 2003 and 2006 is a positive development. Top performers in the area of reading in the Netherlands are primarily found in pre-university education (VWO), where nearly 40% of the students achieved a PISA level of 5 or 6. Internationally, the Netherlands ranked twelfth for this indicator among all 65 countries participating in PISA 2009. The proportion of 15-year-old students that obtained the highest score in the area of natural sciences came to 12.7% in 2009. This is a little less than the percentage in 2006 (13.1%) but still significantly higher than the OECD average (8.5%). The best performers can primarily be found in VWO, where over 50% of the students achieved the highest scores. Boys are slightly over-represented among the best performers. Since 2003, the overall percentage of top performers in mathematics has decreased from 25.5 to 19.9% (22.9% among boys and 16.8% among girls). With this percentage, the Netherlands ranked tenth among all countries participating in PISA 2009. The best performers can primarily be found in VWO, where over 50% of the students achieved the highest scores. (*Ibid.*).

Teaching staff

Pre-service teacher training programmes for the various types of school are part of higher education, some being provided at institutions of higher professional education (HBO) and some at universities. There are full-time, part-time and dual (i.e. work-study) HBO teacher training courses for: primary education; secondary education 'grade two' qualification for the first three years of HAVO and VWO, and all years of VMBO and secondary vocational education; and secondary education 'grade one'



qualification for all levels of secondary education, including pre-higher education level, i.e. the last two years of HAVO and the last three years of VWO. There are also full-time, part-time, and dual university training courses leading to a grade one secondary school teaching qualification (ULO courses) for all levels of secondary education, including pre-higher education. These courses are open to university students and graduates only.

Teacher training courses are available in practically all subjects taught at secondary schools. Grade one and grade two teachers of art, music, handicrafts, eurhythmics, dance, drama, English, German, French, Frisian and physical education are also qualified to teach at primary level and in special education. Primary school teachers are qualified to teach all subjects at primary level and in special education, with the exception of physical education. Most teachers working at special schools have also completed a master's degree course in special educational needs. They may take the course after completing their initial primary or secondary teacher training, or another higher education course. Students can specialize in a particular field of work (e.g. teaching children with hearing disabilities or maladjusted children) and are awarded a qualification with the relevant endorsement. The institutions providing the training decide whether or not a candidate will be admitted. This training course is not compulsory; it is still possible to work in special education with an ordinary teaching qualification. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

The new bachelor's-master's degree system was introduced in September 2002. As a result, the traditional credit system of 42 credits a year (1 credit being equal to 40 hours of study) has been replaced by a new system designed to facilitate the comparison of courses within the European Union. Under the new system, which is based on the European Credit Transfer Accumulation System (ECTS), a student must obtain 60 ECTS credits a year (1 credit being equal to 28 hours of study). Existing initial courses of higher professional education have been converted into bachelor's degree programmes. HBO institutions provide teacher training at both bachelor's (primary and secondary, grade two) and master's (secondary, grade one) level. Universities provide training at master's level only (secondary, grade one).

Primary school teacher training programmes are higher professional education courses offered at both multisectoral HBO institutions and colleges providing primary teacher training only. All programmes have a study load of 240 ECTS credits (equivalent to four years' full-time study). However, students may be given exemptions on the basis of previous educational qualifications or skills acquired elsewhere, so that, in practice, institutions can now offer shorter tailor-made as well as standard programmes. Graduates are fully 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, and particularly in adult education. A postgraduate programme in special education with a study load of 60 ECTS credits is also available. Although not compulsory, almost all teachers working in special education take this programme. Teaching practice is an important component of the teacher training programme. Students receive practical training in the area in which they intend eventually to work. This is a compulsory part of the programme. Around a quarter of the entire programme is devoted to periods of teaching practice, beginning in the first year. Teaching practice takes place mainly in primary and special schools. The post of trainee teacher (LIO) was introduced in primary schools in August 2000.



Students in the final year of their training can be employed part-time under a training and employment contract for a limited period (equivalent to no more than five months' full time), provided the school has a vacancy. Candidates for admission to an HBO primary teacher training programme must possess an HAVO (senior general secondary education), VWO (pre-university education) or MBO (secondary vocational education) certificate. In the latter case they must have completed level 4 (middle-management or specialist training).

Secondary school teacher training programmes are provided at HBO institutions and universities. Programmes offered at HBO lead to either a grade one or a grade two qualification. Programmes are available in general subjects, arts subjects, technical subjects and agricultural subjects. Students specialize in one subject. Programmes cover both subject training and aspects of teaching in general, including: teaching methods; teaching practice; command of language; communication; educational theory. Teachers who have obtained a grade two qualification in a general subject after studying either full or part-time can then take an HBO programme (usually part-time) leading to a grade one qualification in the same subject. Programmes in technical and agricultural subjects lead to a grade two qualification only. Both full-time and part-time programmes are available. Programmes leading to a grade two qualification, both full-time and part-time, have a study load of 240 ECTS credits under the bachelor's-master's system. Programmes consist of a propaedeutic part (60 ECTS credits) and the main part (180 ECTS credits). Qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree may then carry on studying for a grade one qualification in the same subject. These courses have a study load of 120 ECTS credits. The training programme for physical education teachers (a usually full-time course with a study load of 240 ECTS credits) leads to a grade one qualification. Similarly, programmes in certain arts subjects (fine arts and design, music, drama and dance) lead to a grade one qualification only (with a study load of 240 ECTS credits).

University graduates with a 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. The part-time, full-time and dual options all have a study load of 60 ECTS credits (equivalent to one year's full-time study). Courses are available in all subjects in the secondary curriculum. Students specialize 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 programmes have a grade one qualification. There are no rules concerning teaching practice for HBO programmes leading to grade one and grade two teaching qualifications. Similarly, there are no statutory requirements for teaching practice for students attending university programmes. However, the universities themselves have agreed that teaching practice should last 840 hours, 250 of which must be spent in a school, with students actually taking a class for at least 120 hours. Secondary school teacher training programmes now offer a combined period of work and study in the final year. Students can be employed part-time in a school under a training and employment contract for a limited period (equivalent to no more than five months' full time), provided the school has a vacancy. Both university graduates and master's degree students may be admitted to university teacher training programmes, but their subject must correspond to the subject they will be trained to teach. In principle, students should also have completed



a two-month orientation programme as part of their first degree course. There are no government-imposed restrictions on the number of places available. (*Ibid.*).

Increasingly, primary and secondary schools and institutions for adult and vocational education are training teaching staff themselves, including students on a training and employment contract, and teaching assistants undergoing teacher training. This generates a culture of learning and working within schools. Schools share the responsibility for training both new and existing teaching staff with the teacher training institutions. To guarantee the quality of on-the-job training in schools, a number of basic conditions have to be met. They are: close cooperation between schools and teacher training institutions; an infrastructure for training and supervision, which is part of integrated personnel policy; agreements with institutions (providing teacher training or training teaching assistants) on the division of responsibilities and duties; certificates of competence issued by a teacher training institution. Since 2006 the government has been supporting pilot projects in which, as part of their personnel policies, schools shoulder much of the responsibility for training staff such as teachers and teaching assistants. Some projects include studies of ways of combining on-the-job training with research into school development. (*Ibid.*).

Under the Education Professions Act, entered into force in August 2006, educational staff (teachers, assisting staff members, school managers) must not only be qualified, but also competent. For this reason, sets of competences and related requirements have been developed for teachers, assisting staff members and (primary) school managers. Schools are obliged to take competent staff into their employment and subsequently enable them to keep up their competences at a high level and to further improve them. Teacher training colleges use these competences as a guideline to their educational programme. (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2008). The Quality in the Classroom agenda for 2009/11 contains measures for boosting the quality of teacher training and increasing take-up in training institutions. Entry and exit requirements will be introduced for training courses as well as requirements for examinations. In addition, there must be greater scope for excellence. The Quality in the Classroom agenda is based on three key concepts: strengthening the quality of HBO teacher training institutions; employing more university-trained teachers: a new learning pathway will qualify students with a bachelor's degree to teach VMBO theoretical courses and the first three years of HAVO and VWO, provided that they have completed a minor course in teaching; creating more variety in training and the teaching profession with a view to making it more attractive for people to become teachers. (Eurydice, 2008/09).

The curricula of teacher training courses are organized in such a way as to ensure that they meet the standards of competence listed in the Education Professions Act. These are the basic knowledge and skills required of teachers, to which specializations may be added, such as training as a lower or upper primary or vocational teacher, or subject specializations. There are no statutory regulations relating to the organization of teacher training courses or the curriculum. The organization of teaching is regulated in the teaching and examination regulations drawn up by the institution concerned. Only the principles, structure and procedures underlying the teaching and examination regulations are prescribed by law. HBO institutions have reached agreement on a limited number of possible subject combinations and safeguards to ensure that courses train students to meet the standards of competence



and are at higher education level (Dublin descriptors). HBO institutions also provide government-subsidized courses for deputy heads and prospective heads. Some also provide courses in multi-school management.

There are HBO teacher training programmes in general subjects, arts subjects, technical subjects and agricultural subjects. Students qualify to teach one subject, and the courses prepare them to meet the statutory standards of competence. The programmes cover both subject training and aspects of teaching in general, including teaching methods, teaching practice, command of language, communication and educational theory. Qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree may then carry on studying for a grade one qualification in the same subject. These programmes have a study load of 90 ECTS credits. The grade one programmes in arts subjects have a study load of 240 ECTS credits for both full-time and part-time courses. Programmes in technical and agricultural subjects lead to a grade two qualification only. The study load for both full-time and part-time programmes is 240 ECTS credits. The training course for physical education teachers is available as an ungraded (usually full-time) programme with a study load of 240 ECTS credits. University-based teacher training programmes lead to a grade one qualification in one subject (i.e. a HAVO/VWO examination subject), sometimes with an extra qualification to teach a subject like general science or culture and the arts. Science degrees include a teacher training option to be incorporated, as far as possible, in the regular five-year undergraduate programme. (*Ibid.*).

The conditions of service and legal status of education personnel (e.g. teachers, specialist teachers, head teachers, teaching assistants, technical assistants, ICT managers, caretakers, internal counsellors and therapists) in both public-authority and privately run institutions are determined at decentralized level in sectoral collective agreements. Where possible and desirable, these agreements leave room for further elaboration at school-board level. Employers' organizations and trade unions in the education sector negotiate at sectoral level. The competent authority and the federations of public service and education unions representing the staff of the institutions for which that particular competent authority is responsible negotiate at institutional level. There are thus, for the time being, three levels of negotiation: negotiations at central government level (central collective agreement for the educational sector (primary education); negotiations on sectoral collective agreements between employers' organizations and trade unions in the education and science sector; negotiations between competent authorities of institutions and federations of public service and education unions. As part of the administrative reforms in education, the boards and heads of educational institutions are being given increasing autonomy. One example of these reforms is negotiating on pay and conditions. Conditions of service for all educational sectors are now decentralized, with the exception of secondary conditions of service in primary education. The secondary conditions of service of education personnel in primary education, and the primary and secondary conditions of service for education personnel in other education sectors, are regulated in sectoral collective agreements. The Legal Status (Primary Education) Framework Decree governs primary conditions of employment in primary education. The framework decree contains agreements on pay, overall working hours (standard working year), job evaluation and social insurance provision over and above the statutory entitlement.



Generally speaking, teachers applying for a job in a given sector of education must possess a certificate qualifying them to teach the subject or subjects in question at that level. Primary and special school teachers are required to have a primary school teacher training qualification. Secondary school teachers must have a grade one or grade two secondary school teaching qualification. Teachers in higher professional education are required to have an HBO or university degree and a certificate of education. Teachers in adult and vocational education who have not trained as a teacher must have a certificate of education. Apart from the relevant teaching qualifications, teachers must be able to produce a certificate of good conduct. Staff in public-authority schools and institutions are formally public sector personnel; they are public servants within the meaning of the Central and Local Government Personnel Act. The same does not apply to staff in the private sector who sign a contract with the board of the legal person, governed by private law, whose employment they enter. They fall under the provisions of the civil law, insofar as the relevant educational legislation and the regulations based thereon do not differ from these provisions. Private sector staff can be deemed to share the status of public sector personnel in respect of those conditions of service that are determined by the government.

On 1 August 1998 the standard number of hours to be worked per year (standard working year) was fixed at 1,659 for all sectors of education. Staff are appointed to a standard full-time teaching post or a part-time post, expressed as a 'working hours factor'. Ten percent of a teacher's actual working hours are available for professional development. Primary and special school teachers may be required to spend an average of no more than 930 hours a year teaching. For secondary school teachers this figure is 750 hours (a maximum of 26 50-minute lessons a week). In the adult and vocational education sector, arrangements regarding working hours are made by the employer in consultation with the staff representatives on the participation council. Teachers may be assigned no more than 823 hours of executive duties per year. This includes teaching, taking examinations, supervising students on placements, taking practical lessons and running courses provided on a contract basis. Other arrangements may be negotiated at institutional level.

Schools for primary, secondary and special education and adult and vocational education institutions have their own budgets for in-service training for teachers. They decide on both the actual content of courses and the institution that provides the training. Primary schools have had their own training budget since the introduction of block grant funding in August 2006. They are free to spend these funds as they wish, as long as it is used for personnel-related expenditure. There are no specific in-service training institutions governed by law. Courses can be provided by institutions within both the public and commercial domain. Many are provided by the teacher training institutions (HBO institutions and universities with teacher training departments). They are sometimes organized in cooperation with the school advisory services, one of the national educational advisory centres or experts from outside the education system. As of 2008, teachers wishing to raise their professional level, deepen their specialist knowledge or specialize can apply to the Information Management Group for a 'teacher development grant'. (*Ibid.*).



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Education Council: <http://www.onderwijsraad.nl/> [In Dutch; some information in English. Last checked: October 2012.]

Education Inspectorate: <http://www.owinsp.nl/> [In Dutch and English. Last checked: October 2012.]

Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation:
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For more detailed and updated information consult EURYDICE, the information network on national education systems and policies in Europe:
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php

For updated links, consult the Web page of the International Bureau of Education of UNESCO: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/links.htm>